

OPERATION: TOMBSTONE by E. K. Jarvis

MARCH  
25¢



# AMAZING

ANC

## STORIES



An entire Galaxy was doomed unless

someone could unmask

# THE IMPOSTER

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# THE OBSERVATORY

*by the Editor*

## PORTRAIT OF A MAGAZINE TALKING TO ITSELF

**W**ORD has come through that there's going to be some changes made around here. A guy named Browne, who I always figured was on my side, tells me I'm out of step with the times and something has to be done about it.

**"Y**OU'RE old-fashioned," he said. "You take up too much room and you're ragged around the edges and your clothes might have knocked 'em dead back in the Twenties but now they're as out of date as the button shoe. We're going to have to modernize you, brother."

**I** asked him how, and he told me. "First thing," he said, "is to cut you down to digest size. Then we get rid of that yellow saw-edged paper by substituting a book stock all nice and white. Next we stick in twenty pages of color in place of the straight black and white illustrations you've been getting away with for twenty-six years. The real change, though, will be in the stories. We're going to load up all 162 pages of you with the best fiction we can find and price no object. All that means the reader will have to fork over a dime more, but then everything costs more these days and you'll be a big bargain at the price."

**I**T'S been a couple of months since Browne broke the news to me, which means I've had time to think it over. I certainly hope he's not making a big mistake. I know the world moves ahead and you have to keep up with the times or drop out altogether. But I've been around for a long time the way I am now and maybe I know a little more about this business than he does. I've been the leading magazine in the science-fiction field for over twenty-five years, I've made a lot of staunch friends who haven't deserted me just because I'm not as smartly turned out as some of these Johnny-come-latelys. How are they going to feel about all these slicked up changes? That's what worries me!

**S**OME mighty good boys got their start in the writing business with me. Boys like Bill McGivern and Bob Williams and Dave O'Brien and Chet Geier and H.B. Hickey and Paul Fairman and Rog Phillips—the list could go on for pages. I certainly hope they'll not be frozen out by all these fancy high-priced authors Browne is busy rounding up.

**I**'VE seen them come and go: writers, editors, artists and printers. Some of them had a lot on the ball, others didn't last long. Take a guy like Rap, for instance; eleven years we worked together and I couldn't have been in better hands. It's been three years now since he left, and I want to tell you here and now that I really miss having him around! We spoke the same language, Rap and I, and I'll bet he gets just as lonesome for me as I do for him.

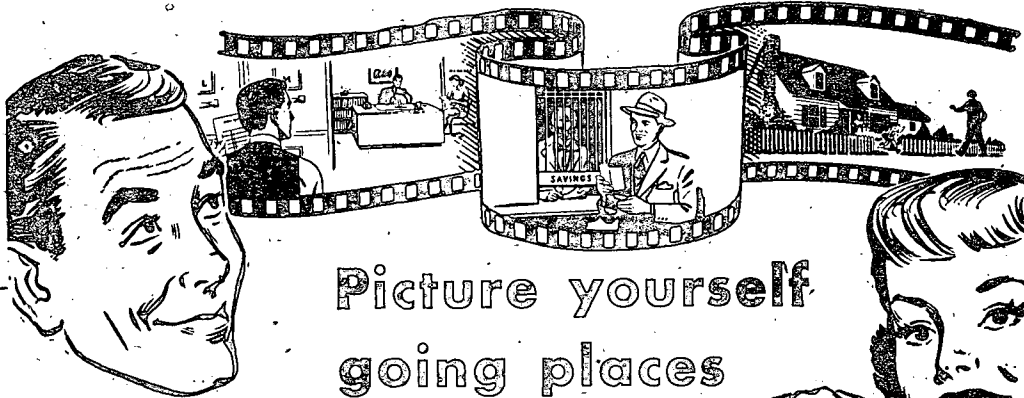
**W**ELL, there's no use crying into my beer about it. Like they say, you can't stand still in this business. It's the bright new package people pick up these days, and I guess these new fancy doodads will look all right on me after all. If I could just be sure my old friends can still find me.

**F**EBRUARY 10th is the day I put on the tux and Homburg hat. Lots of color, plenty of dash, the right amount of sang-froid, savoir faire and who's on third. From what I hear, a lot of distinguished and famous contributors will help make my coming-out party a success. Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer who, together, form one of the best known by-lines in the world. Robert Heinlein, who is Mr. Science Fiction himself; Murray Leinster, who was writing and selling stf back in the days of the turkey-trot; Ray Bradbury, famous today and destined to be a lot more famous in the future; and others of near or equal stature. Sounds great, all right; I hope I don't catch my foot in that red carpet!

—A. S.

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He was a superman with all the physical perfection of a god from high Olympus. But there was no place for him in a world of trial and error

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Night means many things to many people. For lovers, it is beauty, for the weary, it is rest. And for demons from hell, it is paradise!

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# PIG IN A POKE

By Charles Recour

THE TELECOM flashed Brady's face. I switched to counter and Brady said: "I've got it straightened out, Jim. Can you run up right now? And Jim...it isn't exactly good news...."

My secretary flashed a heli cab and a few minutes later I, Jim Hunter, consulting general engineer, successful, moneyed—and a sucker—was in the offices of Brady & Associates, Law, Terran and Interplanetary.

Brady had a pile of drawings, topographic maps and photographs of the Martian "pig in a poke" in front of him. There were no formalities.

"Sit down, Jim," he motioned me into a chair. "I'm not going to try and soften it. You've been taken...well—wait a minute. Jim, just what do you think you own in the way of Martian territory?"

"According to Fitzhugh, I've got two hundred thousand square meters of Martian soil. I know I've got that because he got that under the Colonial land grants and the money deal was honest."

"Right," Brady said; "you've got the land all right, but it's not where you think it is."

"Where is it?"

"Ostensibly your plot was supposed to be within transport range of the dome and Fitzhugh said it was a matter of fifty kilometers. But that's where you've been hosed, Jim, smoothly and nicely. The land is within range of the dome—by rocket! Fitzhugh very nicely shifted coordinates by forty degrees—both ways. Jim Hunter, you own two hundred thousand square meters of Mars about eighteen hundred kilometers from Heliopolis. Fitzhugh still has his original holdings, this claim coming from an exploratory flight he happened to make three years ago. It's all there, right and legal in the fine print." Brady shook his head. "Sorry, Jim," he added, "that's it."

"What action can I take against him?"

"None—none whatsoever!" Brady ruffled the papers in front of him. "There it is, in black and white. He's got you and there's nothing you can do—unless you want to look it over."

"I can't touch him. I own the Martian land and that's it."

"Right, Jim."

I had enough experience to act as my own geologist and minerologist, so I rented a shuttle rocket and two crewmen, and visited my "pig in a poke".

As we blew across the pale reddish

sands of Mars, spotted here and there with lichenous vegetation, I admit my optimistic feelings didn't improve any. There is a wild beauty about Mars and of course the ever-present sense of alienation, remoteness from home, Man-conquering-space, and all that sort of thing, but men are economic animals and my mind was thinking of how much I'd invested in barrenness.

We reached my area, which of course appeared no different from the surrounding desolation. Pale reddish sand and pale greenish lichenous matter.

With one of the two men, I suited and started to foot-range the plot. There are three economic possibilities in Martian land: water, oxygen, and copper. The first two concern Mars alone. My plot showed nothing hydrous, not even calcium sulfate, which some plants were working near New Sacramento and which many more would eventually open up. There was no pod-oxygen conversion plant life either. That I knew at once through aerial survey.

Then in a gullied, hilly Marain we stumbled upon the hut. It was a standard luminum "Spherocell" and inside was the dessicated body of the man who'd supposedly hosed me. Now I knew why I hadn't been able to locate Fitzhugh.

It was all down neatly, for Fitzhugh had known he was going to die. His transmitters were smashed and he had no means of communicating. When the oxygen ran out, he opened his suit and died very quickly.

The letter, though, explained everything. "...I knew I'd made a mistake," it said in part, "for I had the certain feeling there were rich copper deposits here—it was a geological necessity. Hunter, if this is brought to your attention, know that my original intentions were to skin you—but that's not going to happen. I intended to easily buy back this land. Check my notes and you'll find fantastic amounts of copper. With Terran reserves absolutely exhausted, you can write your own ticket—they'll probably build a city right here...."

When Brady learned what had happened, he couldn't believe it. But the copper deposits are being worked and the ships are bringing it home with plenty of big fat credits for me. Brady has to caution me...I'm a sucker for buying blind, for buying any old "pig in a poke"—Martian or Terran....



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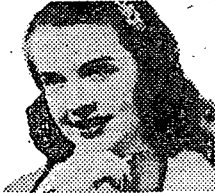
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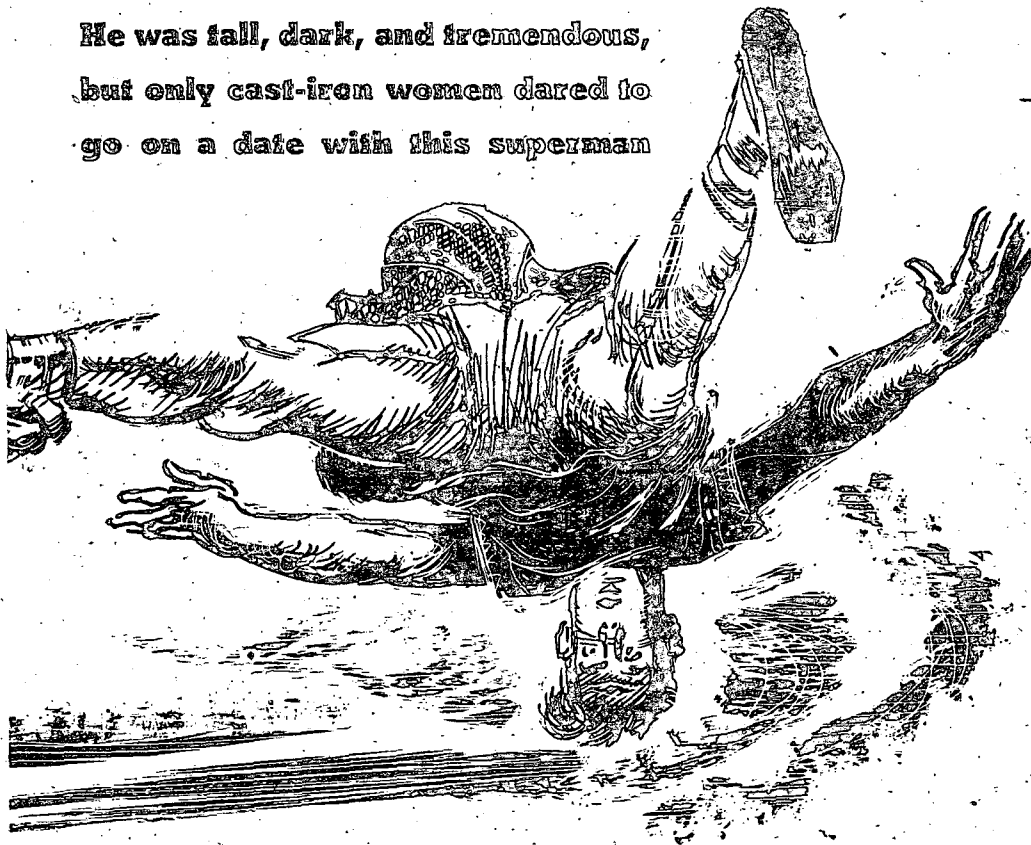
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The little man flew through the air like a toy



He was tall, dark, and tremendous,  
but only cast-iron women dared to  
go on a date with this superman



# THE IMPOSTER

By Paul Lohrman

ARCHIE BAKER let his Cadillac drift over toward the curb while he reached for the starter. The motor coughed once. That was all. He glanced at his wristwatch worriedly, mentally cursing the fact that he had cut the time so close. Now he would have to call a taxi.

He saw a bank of telephone booths. He slid into a vacant booth, lifted the receiver, dropped his dime in the slot.

He rattled the phone. His dime was returned. He snatched it up and went

to the other vacant booth. A minute later he realized this phone was out of order too. As he stepped out of the booth the woman in the next one sang, "Good Bayee!" and hung up. That phone was working, at least.

But it wasn't. Nor was the next one to become vacant.

Archie stood before the bank of phones in indecision. Maybe, he decided, it would be quicker to look for a cruising taxi. He hurried from the drugstore in time to see a taxi coming toward him. He rushed into the street to hail it. It stopped beside him.

"Central Wrestling Arena," he said, "and hurry. I'm late now and I'm in the semi-final."

"Right!" the driver said. He slipped into low. The car started up, then slowed abruptly.

Archie groaned in impatience as he heard the too familiar whine of the starter against a reluctant motor. This went on for two or three minutes.

"Something's wrong," the driver said unnecessarily.

"Get me a cab that works," Archie snapped.

"Sure." The driver picked up his radio phone. It was dead.

Practically taking the side of the cab with him as he erupted to the street, Archie hurried back to his Cadillac. Maybe it would start now. He glanced at his watch. Two minutes after eight.

He wasted a precious three minutes running his battery down before he gave up. What should he do next?

He managed to flag down an obliging motorist. He promised the man five dollars to get him to the arena. The man's motor wouldn't start. Again there was the torturing sound of the starter.

He went back to the drugstore to call a taxi again. The phones went dead the moment he tried to use them. Someone stepped into a booth he had just vacated. The phone seemed to work all right for that person.

In desperation Archie went in back to the druggist and offered him a dollar bill to get him a taxi in a hurry.

"Sure," the druggist said. "Keep your dollar." He got the taxicab company without trouble. "One'll be here in five minutes," he said when he hung up.

It was three minutes. The bright yellow cab pulled up in front of the drugstore. Its motor purred smoothly.

Archie got in. The motor coughed apologetically. The starting motor whined.

It was eight-thirty. Archie did some mental calculation. It was three or four miles to the arena. He could run all the way and get there almost in time. He wasted no more time in thinking.

**H**IS PACE was smooth and distance eating. It ate up two blocks quickly. A wall of people, their backs to him, blocked his way. He pushed through them with impatient gentleness. Ahead of him was a clear space where four men seemed to be engaged in a free-for-all. A knife flashed in the light of the streetlamp.

Archie forgot momentarily his date with Zomby. He was in the street, deftly extracting the knife from the nerveless fingers of the would-be killer.

"All right! Break it up!"

It was a cop. A dozen cops. With drawn guns and swinging clubs. Archie tried to explain. He was told to save his voice, and was herded with the four into a paddy wagon.

It was ten-thirty when he was permitted to use the phone at the police station. The phone worked. He got the dressing room phone at the arena. He asked for Joe Silverburg. A moment later Joe's cheery voice greeted him.

"This's Archie. I'm sorry as hell about not getting there," he said, "I got tied up in the most absurd combination of things."

"What are you talking about? Who is this?" Joe asked.

"This's Archie, Joe. I'm at—"

"Archie who?"

"Oh for God's sake, Joe! Archie Baker. I'm trying to tell you why I didn't get there in time for my fight tonight."

"Are you crazy—whoever you are?" Joe said incredulously. "Archie just left. He put on the best fight of his

career. Whoever you are, don't bother me. Go sober up someplace."

**I**T SEEMED it was necessary to hire a lawyer if he wanted to get out. There was Margot to worry about, too. He had a date with her at eleven and it was twenty-five to.

It was ten to eleven before he located a lawyer who would agree to come down at once. Archie tried Margot's phone in between calls. Her line remained busy.

It was still busy when he tried it at five to twelve before he left the police station, free on bail. He caught a taxi. Its motor didn't stop. For an extra five and a guarantee of payment of all tickets, the driver sped across town to Margot's apartment.

There was a light under her door, of course. Archie knocked. The door was flung open to reveal an irate young blonde, female type.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Archie said, starting to enter.

Margot blocked his entrance.

"I got tied up," he explained limply. "I kept calling you to tell you, but the line was busy."

"The line was not busy. It's a one party line. It hasn't rung all evening."

"Aren't you going to let me come in?" Archie asked weakly.

"No. I'm going to bed. I'm hurt. I dress up. You don't even bother to call me. Well... call me in a couple of days. Maybe I'll get over it." She shut the door.

He stared at the coldly uninviting panel for a bleak moment, then slunk down the hall to the elevator. In the street a taxi was cruising along slowly. He stopped it and got in. The cab motor worked smoothly. Ten minutes later he was back where he had left the Cadillac. It was gone.

He called the police department.

They hadn't impounded it or anything. So he reported it stolen. The officer told him to call back in ten minutes for a report.

In ten minutes he made the call.

"Who are you trying to kid, Mr. Baker?" the man snapped. "I had one of our cars take a look in at your garage. It's where you always park it for the night. Go take a look for yourself." There was a loud click.

Archie left the drugstore and hailed a cruising cab. He gave the driver his hotel address and sat back and closed his eyes.

Someone was shaking him. He opened his eyes. It was daylight. He shook his head groggily. He had had a nightmare. Maybe a nightmare and a lot of dreams. He could straighten them out later. He got out and handed the driver a five dollar bill, receiving his change in silver which he absently dropped into his pocket.

It wasn't until the cab had pulled away that he realized he wasn't at his hotel, but miles away from it in front of an office building.

"Paper, mister?" an urchin asked.

"Sure," Archie said. He took a quarter out of his pocket and dropped it into the dirty hand as he took the paper.

The urchin looked at the quarter, then back up at him accusingly. "Whatcha trin' t'do? This's no good."

"Huh?" Archie looked at the quarter. As he looked at it his head began to ache.

It seemed a perfectly good geeyout. Why wouldn't the boy take it?

Sharp pains stabbed in his eyes. He took out his billfold and extracted a dollar bill. He studied it suspiciously, showed it to the urchin, and asked if it looked okay.

"Sure," the boy said. He took it and gave Archie his change.



Archie strolled along the sidewalk until he was out of sight of the paper boy. Then he took the small handful of coins from his pocket and inspected them. Some of them were not ordinary American coins. They were foreign. The symbols on them were strange, and yet he knew what they meant.

It was just another of the impossible things. It was no wonder his head was aching. He put them back in his pocket for later examination and went into a cafe.

Ordering ham and eggs and coffee, he spread out the paper to read. It wasn't until half an hour later when he had finished his meal that he noticed the date on one of the inside pages. August fifteenth.

But that couldn't be right. Last night he was to have wrestled Zomby, and last night was August third.

Down the counter a ways was an old crumpled up paper. He got it and looked at the date on it. August fourteenth.

"Looking for something, mister?" the waitress asked.

"Ah, yes. You don't happen to have the August third paper around yet, do you?"

"Could have. I'll look. We pile them in the back room for the Volunteers to pick up." She went away, and returned in a few minutes with the paper.

With trembling fingers and aching head Archie turned to the sport section. There it was, the ad. for the wrestling events, and he was listed for the semi-final with Zomby.

He looked up at the waitress. "Is today the fifteenth?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's... what... I thought..." Archie said. Deep within him a small spark of anger had sprung into life.

Archie took two one dollar bills from his billfold, examined them care-

fully, and dropped them beside his plate.

As he walked toward the doors he touched the back of his head where it ached. It was very sensitive there.

HE WALKED two blocks, trying to get his confused thoughts in some semblance of order. Twelve days seemed to be missing, among other things. Twelve days during which he had apparently been asleep in a taxi. It had been the same taxi. He remembered a scratch on the door window.

He found himself in front of a drugstore. A drugstore meant telephones. He went in and dialed Margot's number. She would be madder than ever at him. If she wasn't the prettiest girl he had ever known...

He sighed and dropped in the dime. He dialed the number and heard the ring at the other end. "Hello," Margot said.

"This is Archie. Still mad at me?"

"Mad at you? Silly boy. Not after last night."

"Then... can I come over tonight about eight?"

"Of—just a minute darling. Someone's at the door."

Archie inspected his fingernails while he waited. It was a full two minutes. Then Margot's voice sounded, bitingly frigid. "Whoever you are," she said, interspersing some words that sounded anachronistic from her lips, "you can go—" And she described in detail where he could go. Then she said something that explained her outburst. "Archie just came in the door."

The small smoldering spark of anger developed red flames. So this mysterious guy was at her apartment. Archie slammed down the receiver and ran blindly out to the street, nearly losing his life in the process of stopping a taxi.

It was fifteen minutes, mostly filled with traffic delays, before the taxi disgorged him in front of the apartment house. He waited impatiently for the elevator, rode it to the fifth floor, and a few seconds later was standing in front on Margot's door. He lifted his clenched fist to bang on the panel.

"I'm ready, Archie." Margot's voice sounded through the door.

"Okay, let's go," a male voice answered.

This was a chance to see what was what. Archie looked down the hall. Not too far away was a stair door. He ran to it quickly, ducked inside, then peeked out.

Margot was emerging from her apartment. Following her, a familiar figure emerged. It was a figure Archie had seen often in his mirror.

The man looked in his direction and smirked. The red flames of anger burned to white heat, but caution held Archie still. What should he do? Should he wait? Or should he rush out and tackle the upstart right now?

They had reached the elevator. They went in and the door closed. It was too late to do anything here. But the elevator was slow. He could be downstairs when they stepped out.

He turned to leap down the stairs—and abruptly he was surrounded by at least a dozen men in identical clothing of bright red.

He didn't pause to ask questions. Here was something physical. Something tangible. These men wanted to stop him. He picked up two of them and tossed them viciously against the others. A figure that hadn't been there was clutching at him from behind. The stairwell was swarming with red uniformed men.

His anger at white heat, Archie began systematically breaking bones, enjoying their dulled sound and the

screams that followed. But hands were dragging at his arms. Hands he couldn't dislodge. He was pulled down, smothered under an avalanche of bodies. A snap and his wrists were locked together. Another, and his ankles were pinned firmly.

He lay quiet. The smothering figures withdrew. He looked up, blinking. The walls of the stairwell were gone, somehow. Overhead was a ceiling of painted metal. He was in a room much larger than any there could ever have been in the apartment house.

Injured men were being pulled out of the way. Male voices were muttering strange curses. Wild eyes were looking toward him, then away as he grinned mockingly at them.

And, slowly, his grin faded. A realization was creeping in that though he understood every word uttered by these men, it was not English nor any language he had ever heard before.

The grin vanished altogether when he abruptly realized it was the same language that was on those strange coins in his pocket, the ones the taxi driver had given him for change.

A MAN IN a green uniform appeared from somewhere and came over, standing beside him, looking down at him.

"So," he said in the strange language, "we found you, Pornz. We had to sift two galaxies to do it, but we caught up with you."

"You have the wrong man," Archie said in the same language, not even feeling surprise that he could do so. "I'm Archie Baker."

"We'll soon see," the officer said. He called for an identification technician and stood aside, frowning patiently, while the man took fingerprints, blood sample, and hair sample. They all checked with a card that

bore Archie's picture.

"That's that," the officer said, satisfied. "Same fingerprints, same blood, same hair structure. You are Pornz Agla and you know it." He turned to waiting men. "Put him in a cell." He turned on his heel and left the room.

Archie was lifted to his feet and pushed along toward another door. He was taken along a corridor of metal, down metal steps, shoved through a metal door into a small room of solid metal. The door clanged shut and was bolted.

He was alone. The handcuffs were still on him, and the ankle chains. He sat up, his head throbbing. Near him on the metal floor was a small folded bit of paper.

He slid over to it and picked it up. Unfolding it, he saw writing on it in a strange scrawl that was like nothing he had ever seen, but which made perfect sense. It said in the strange language, "Take it easy. Rescue will take place in intergalactic pause."

He folded the note and put it in a pocket. A few moments later the door opened and a key was tossed on the floor. The man who dropped it said, "Take off your cuffs. You can exchange them for your first meal later on."

"Where are we?" Archie asked hastily.

The man grinned. "Light years from your hideout planet," he said. "You know, for the master revolutionist, Pornz Agla, you proved awfully stupid. Didn't you know we could track your ion trail across a dozen galaxies, and with the five dimensional tabulator pick you out no matter what time you hid out in on that planet?"

"Five dimensional tabulator?" Archie echoed, bewildered.

"Certainly. The minute we found the end of trail we turned the tabula-

tor to work. It sifted every member of the native race on that planet from the beginning right up to the point where we got you, scanning the entire population every ten years."

The man backed out of the room, the door slamming and locking behind him.

Things were beginning to make sense to Archie. He had been captured by the police of some super colossal civilization. They thought he was some revolutionary named Pornz Agla.

This Agla has obviously planned well. He too had searched. He had found his identical double and taken his place.

Archie picked up the key and unlocked his handcuffs, a crooked smile on his tired features. There was only one good thing about all this, he reflected. The real Pornz Agla had Margot—and he could keep her...

**T**HE PRISON cell was a trifle incredible. There was a small board with pushbuttons on it, each one labeled. When he pressed the one labeled bathroom, a complete bathroom materialized at one end of the cell. Wondering if it would vanish again while he was using it, he relaxed for half an hour in a tub of hot, scented water. There was an electric razor that made no sound whatever and took his whiskers off as clean as a sharp edged blade.

When he tired of the bathroom he pressed its button again and it vanished. He chose next a bedroom. There were fresh clothes in a wardrobe closet and he chose a combination most nearly resembling his own clothes.

He left the bedroom in place and pressed the button for food. Nothing happened. He had a fairly good idea why. If two things materialized in the



same spot there might be trouble. He got rid of the bedroom and then pressed the dinner button.

"The handcuffs first, please," a metallic voice said.

"What'll I do with them?"

"The disposal chute, stupid."

"Oh," Archie grunted good-naturedly. He pressed the disposal chute button. In one corner of the room a small door materialized in the wall.

He picked up the two pairs of handcuffs and went over to the door. It was too small for him to crawl through. He dropped the handcuffs in the opening and saw a flash of fire leap out and consume them.

He pressed the disposal chute button and watched it vanish. Then he pressed the dinner button. A table and comfortable chair appeared, and against one wall was a gleaming cabinet with dozens of buttons on a panel.

The panel was a menu. The names of things seemed familiar, but he couldn't visualize any of the dishes. He stabbed one button half way down. Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then a steaming dish of meat and vegetables slid out of an opening.

An hour later he brought back the bedroom and was soon sleeping the sleep of mental and physical exhaustion.

When he awoke it took him several minutes before he could accept the memories of what had happened. After another bath and a breakfast of soft boiled eggs (obtained by the simple process of pressing the menu buttons one after another and tossing the plates down the materialized disposal chute until, surprisingly, he had obtained eggs and a form of buttered toast) he studied the other buttons on the magic board that conjured up so many different rooms in one.

The button labeled *external view-*

*screens* attracted his immediate interest. He pressed it. Across the room six rectangular screens materialized on the wall.

In each screen there was star studded blackness. The bright pinpoints were moving slowly. In the screen marked *forward* the points were sliding slowly off on all sides from a common center. In the screen marked *stern* the stars were emerging from the sides and going toward the center.

Were they stars? Suns, with their planetary systems? If they were, the ship must be travelling billions of miles each second. Maybe lightyears a second. Faster than light. But that wouldn't make any difference on a t.v. screen. It would show centers of energy as bright points.

Archie studied the six screens, grateful for his education that made at least the results understandable. He doubted if even the most learned scientist on Earth could have understood much more.

After a while he grew tired of watching. He switched off the viewscreens and materialized a living room. It was comfortably furnished and contained the sedate equivalent of a juke box with movie screen.

For hours he watched with intense interest as he saw human and non-human entertainers do their stuff. Songs in weird cadences and unearthly notes. Dances similar to those on earth, and dances in gravity-free space. Things that stirred strange emotions.

He played over some of the skits with non-human players. There were three alien species. One species resembled snakes with jointed arms and human-like hands. A second had no counterpart on earth, although it resembled somewhat a land octopus with a clownish face. The third was the only one that was truly repulsive, and

that only in a sinister manner. It was vaguely human in form, but quite reptilian in personality. Its legs were jointed like the pictures of the god, Pan. It had short polished horns, and instead of a nose it had a long graceful elephantine trunk. Its hands consisted entirely of dozens of long, extremely mobile fingers. It played a stringed instrument, and the music it created was in itself sinister.

Finally hunger overcame the fascination of what he was hearing and seeing. He realized it had been hours since breakfast.

He banished the comforts of the living room. Out of curiosity he materialized the viewscreens before summoning the food cabinet. In the forward viewscreen stars weren't rushing inward like driving snowflakes any more. Instead, occupying a third of the screen, was the contours of a spiral nebula.

And in the stern screen was a luminous disc shaped somewhat like a thin watchcase. The galaxy the solar system was in? Archie recalled having read somewhere that our galaxy was shaped like a thin watch.

He banished the screens and brought in the food cabinet. This time there was something quite familiar on a strange button. A thick steak he would have sworn was choice beef. And real mushrooms.

**A**NOTHER day passed. At its end he was humming tunes in strange musical scales, with alien words that had emotion disturbing rhythms. He was growing familiar with the mannerisms of the three non-human species.

A brief checkup on the viewscreens showed that the spiral nebula was perceptibly closer. It shone with a faintly bluish glow, incredibly soft.

He had saved the note he had found

on the floor. More than once he had re-examined it, speculating on how it had gotten into his prison cell. Had one of the men who brought him to the cell tossed it in unobserved? If that were so, it meant that friends of Pornz Agla were on board. There could be a mutiny.

But there was another possible way it could have been tossed there. From some other dimension. The objection to that theory was that quite obviously all the attachments to the room were kept in other three-spaces adjacent to the one he was in. He wasn't quite sure whether they were brought into his three-space, or he into theirs. It didn't make any difference. But in either case it seemed hardly likely someone could be hiding in an adjacent three-space.

It had to be one of the crew. Someone who obviously thought he was Pornz Agla.

He spent a great deal of time speculating what would happen if he were "rescued" and his rescuers discovered he wasn't Agla. But, he decided, rescue was definitely welcome. If he could pass himself off among the rebels as their leader, he might be able to get back to Earth and be himself again.

On the third day he discovered he could leave the viewscreens materialized and also materialize the living room. He spent hours watching the slow approach of the spiral nebula.

He was watching the forward screen when out of the corner of his eye he caught movement in all four of the side screens. He shifted his gaze and saw what could only be spaceships. They had materialized rather than approached.

In the next instant he saw a slim pencil of light go out from the side of one screen and touch at the base of the long slender needle nose of the near-

est ship. The needle seemed to melt and twist. The bright yellow color of the ship became an incandescent white at the base of the needle.

The yellow ships vanished abruptly. The spiral nebula vanished also. It reappeared again, different in shape and color. One of the slender spaceships appeared briefly, then vanished.

More of the ships appeared and disappeared. The heavens were no longer standing still, but spinning, so that any scene shifted through all six view-screens.

Something black materialized suddenly, blotting out half the blue galaxy. The blackness was gone, then back again, larger. Strange, sickening sensations coursed through Archie's body. There was no acceleration or change in the normal feeling of weight, but he had long ago decided that here weight was artificial, produced by some artificial field or force.

The blackness suddenly blotted out everything on all six screens. It stayed there.

A moment later screens and living room vanished from around him. He was in the bare room once again. A key was grating in the lock. The door opened. Outside were men in their bright red uniforms. They had weapons of some sort trained on him.

"Captain Tlar wants you in the control room," one of them said. "Come with us. At once."

Their expressions were patently worried.

**I**N THE room where he was taken were viewscreens along one wall. All of them held only the blackness. Captain Tlar was the officer who had ordered him taken to the prison cell.

As Archie entered the room Tlar turned to him, feet wide apart, his eyes flashing fire.

"Before I surrender you," he said, "I'll kill you with my own hands. They've left a communication beam open. Let them know that."

"Can't you get away from them?" Archie asked.

Tlar blinked at him. "Have you lost your memory?" he said. "Your ships have us in a hypertube of intertronic force. Our only escape is into totally empty hyperplanes where our very atoms will fall apart and disperse like dust. And in any hyperplane in the tube we become a small enclosed universe that will run down in too short a time to waste words like this."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Archie demanded.

"Let them know I mean business," Tlar said. "I'm not giving you up. That's final. We've all got to die sometime, and I can't think of a better way than taking you with me. If they want to wait and maybe get you free some other way they can shut off the tube and let us go. Tell them that."

Archie hesitated, studying the taut faces of the other men in the room. He sensed what would have to happen. Mutiny. Who among these men were in on that?

"Well?" Tlar demanded.

"You won't change your mind?" Archie asked softly.

"Never!"

"Okay, men," Archie said meaningfully, not taking his eyes off the Captain.

He didn't know what he had expected. Whatever it was, it wasn't what he saw. A pencil of light came from one side and touched the Captain's forehead. His entire head seemed to glow. Abruptly the beam of energy was gone. Tlar's head looked cooked.

Archie remained motionless, forcing himself to keep his reaction of horror completely hidden. He didn't turn to

see who had wielded the weapon. He watched the Captain crumple to the floor.

Then he looked up at the living, his face and eyes expressionless. Sickly green faces looked back at him and turned away. Archie sympathized with them. They reflected his own horror.

But, and it surprised him, there was another feeling in him. The anger he had first felt back on earth was still there, smouldering. And none of these people belonged to the human race of the earth. In a way he didn't quite accept their reality. They were part of the madness that had descended upon him when his car had stopped without reason and the telephones wouldn't work for him.

He felt ashamed of the feeling. At the same time he realized he was in a ticklish position. He didn't dare show weakness now.

"Next in command?" he asked tonelessly.

A man across the room paled abruptly and took a step backward.

"Surrender the ship," Archie said coldly.

For a brief instant a fire of defiance glowed in the man's eyes. It died, leaving defeat. With his hands visibly shaking, the man stepped to a microphone and croaked his surrender into it.

Immediately the viewscreens lit up again with stars and a dozen or more yellow pencils of spaceships. The new captain was issuing quick orders over the intercom system.

Men stepped up beside Archie, weapons at their sides for instant action, grins of triumph on their faces.

"Good work," Archie said. He wondered which of them had killed the Captain, but didn't dare ask.

**H**E AND the mutineers were sent across to one of the yellow ships

in a small cruiser. He obtained his first view of the ship he had been on. Unlike the other ships, it was a large sphere, bright red. He resisted the impulse to ask why. He would, he realized, eventually know everything just by waiting it out. If he survived.

His companions were in high good spirits. He made an effort and joined in with their gay mood. And shortly they were approaching one of the yellow ships.

Its size had been deceptive at a distance. It was, he saw, at least two or three thousand feet long and a hundred feet in diameter. Along the side were round openings. The small ship he was on headed for one of these and entered it.

There was a jerk as magnetic clamps gripped the ship. The airlock opened.

"Pornz, you devil!" a giant of a man shouted, bursting through the small airlock opening and nearly bowling him over. "When the machine told us you were captured we thought you were done for." The giant quieted down, his hand resting on Archie's shoulder. "But I told the boys we would get you or my name isn't Tarc Blum. We did, too."

Archie grinned and said nothing.

"But what are we doing standing here?" Tarc Blum said. "You need some rest, and maybe a little drink of elixir. You're beginning to show a little age under the eyes."

Archie let himself be shoved along within the protection of the giant's arm. At the airlock he slid through into a large space where hundreds of grinning faces cheered him. He waved at them vaguely, hoping he was doing all right.

Tarc Blum came next and took charge of him again. And the crew was cheering again as the mutineers emerged from the airlock opening.



"Let's go up to your quarters, Pornz," Tarc said in an undertone. "You look like you needed some rest, and you should know what's been happening. I've already given orders for destruction of the Federation ship, and we're on our way again."

Archie gasped, then hid his reaction under pretended interest in something on one side. A cold chill crawled up his spine. It wasn't like the pretended viciousness in the wrestling ring. Here death was taken casually, it seemed. As casually as on a battle field.

Maybe it was a battle field, on a cosmic scale. Certainly, he reflected, he wouldn't be horrified back on earth if he went on a tour of the battle field in Korea to entertain the soldiers and was informed an enemy concentration had been wiped out with flaming gasoline jelly!

And Tarc Blum was thoroughly likeable.

He decided to withhold judgment until he knew more. What was the Federation? It must be a despotic interstellar group holding whole planets in slavery. If it were, he could quite gladly join these men in freeing the slave planets.

SOMETHING that had been bothering him crept up into conscious thought. Why had Tarc Blum used the expression, "or my name isn't Tarc Blum"? Did he know he wasn't Pornz? Was he in on the scheme to hide Pornz by substituting a stand-in with identical physical details of identification?

He studied Tarc as they walked side by side. Genuine affection shone in the large, pale blue eyes of the giant.

"The machine told us it thought it had hidden you where you couldn't be located," Tarc was saying. He chuckled. "First time the machine underes-

timated the abilities of the Federation. But now you're safe enough from capture. The machine released the secret of dense alarms that keeps it unreachable. Your whole fleet is being equipped. Too bad we lost one ship getting you back. Can't be helped now."

They had reached an elevator. Tarc stood aside. Archie stepped in. He watched Tarc enter the elevator, and marvelled at his size. He himself was six feet two inches and weighed two hundred and eighteen pounds stripped. Tarc was seven feet tall and appeared to weigh over three hundred, all well knit muscle and bone. His features were a little on the Norse side. He could very well be the classic Norse type of legend.

The elevator didn't seem to have moved, but the doors opened and revealed a large expanse of thick rug and luxurious furnishings that stretched off into the distance to a twenty foot wall which curved gradually.

As he and Tarc walked across to another elevator he saw more of the giant room and realized it occupied a full crosssection of the ship.

"Your own elevator," Tarc said. "Have you missed it?"

Archie nodded, and stepped in.

Once again they waited a moment in an elevator that didn't seem to move. The doors opened and they were in a smaller room.

"Your private quarters," Tarc said. "I'll bet you're glad to be back—and safe, too. I'll stay just long enough to have a glass of elixir with you. Then I'll leave you until you can rest."

Tarc crossed to a small cabinet and opened it. Inside was a refrigerated space filled with rows of gleaming bottles. He brought out two of them. From another part of the cabinet he brought out two glasses.

He poured the sparkling amber fluid into the glasses and handed one to Archie.

Archie sampled the fluid cautiously. It was slightly sweet and bit at his tongue. He swallowed the sample. It tingled all the way down.

Tarc had gulped his drink without stopping. He wiped his lips with his sleeve and grinned at Archie. "Drink it down," he said. "You need it. You probably haven't had any for ten days, at least."

"That's right," Archie agreed. "I haven't." He took another swallow. And another. He studied the strange sensation it was producing. It wasn't alcoholic, nor was it any narcotic he had ever heard of. An odor of roses was in his nostrils yet there were no roses. The odor was the taste of his blood. He could almost sense the strange fluid entering the cells of his body.

"Good thing we rescued you," Tarc said gruffly. "They wouldn't have let you get elixir, and you'd have died of physical atrophy in forty or fifty years. A hell of an ending for a man who's lived the centuries we have."

Archie stared at the amber fluid with a new understanding. So that was why the strange language translated the meaning of the word as *elixir*. The legendary elixir of life!

He waited no longer, but drank until the glass was empty. The fluid made him conscious of every square inch of his stomach, in a delightfully pleasant way. The elixir of life! He chuckled. Unless the real Pornz Agla had taken along a supply or knew how to make the stuff, he must already have died of old age back on Earth.

He lowered the glass.

A girl had entered the room. She was beautiful. Her rich brown hair was done in loose waves. Her features

were as perfectly molded as those of any Hollywood star.

"Pornz!" she whispered.

"I'll see you after your rest period," Tarc said, turning and striding to the elevator.

A second later and he was gone and the girl was coming toward Archie, a happy smile trembling on her lips.

"This is where I get exposed," Archie thought. Then he remembered the real Pornz Agla walking to the hall with Margot's arm twined possessively in his.

The girl held out her arms. Archie hesitated.

"Aren't you happy to see me, Pornz?" she asked.

"Of course," Archie said uncomfortably.

"Perhaps one of the others?" she said. She stared at him, then abruptly turned and uttered a musical whistle.

At once other girls ran into the room, their faces lighting up with happy expectation.

Archie's jaw dropped in stupefaction, then he laughed. There might be safety in numbers or something, he decided.

"No, no," he said, pushing them away. "Can't you understand I need some rest? None of you."

"He needs rest," the first girl said. "He gets rest, but remember, it's still my turn to be with him when he wants us."

"I'll draw your bath," one girl said eagerly, scampering away.

The others pulled at his clothing. He resisted until he saw that they were beginning to be hurt and suspicious. Then, laughingly, hiding his discomfiture, he let them have their way.

It was a strange experience, being bathed by ten incredibly beautiful girls. And, Archie reflected as they dried him and brought him a crimson

robe even richer than the one he wore into the wrestling ring, the Earth was a long ways away...

WITH HIS robe secure about him he paused. Ten pairs of beautiful eyes waited expectantly. He swallowed, and the sound was as thunder in the stillness. If there were just one, he thought uncomfortably.

"I think I'll read a while," he said with studied casualness, and was relieved at the looks of disappointment that came into the ten pairs of eyes.

The girls obediently conducted him to a form fitting lounge, then looked at him questioningly.

"Let's see," he stalled, "what was I reading last?"

They looked blank.

"Have I got something on basic physics?" he asked hastily.

One of them nodded and beat the others to a cabinet. She returned triumphantly with a small square box of gray plastic and handed it to him. On it was embossed the inscription, "Physics for the Layman," with the name, Skusz Erimt, under it.

Archie nodded and handed it back to her. With a happy intimate smile she opened it and slid it into a small slot in the arm of the chair.

A moment later a cultured voice began speaking slowly. Archie leaned back and closed his eyes.

*The hyper-universe is a five dimensional continuum of infinite extent, the voice said. Its basic nature is nothing more nor less than space and duration of space. Space itself consists of three types of basic extensions which are relatively minus, plus, and their superimposition, zero. Any three dimensional space continuum consists of these three types. In our first studies we will deal only with a single system or universe of three space di-*

*mensions and the dimension of duration...*

A head had come to rest cautiously on Archie's knee. He opened his eyes and frowned into the wide, timid eyes that looked up at him. The head was hastily withdrawn. He closed his eyes again.

*We will reserve until later the study of the quaternion elements of space, the voice went on. Those are particulate as are the so-called normal units, but they are basic to the hyper-relations of the laminations of reality and have never entered decisively into natural phenomena, being too loosely distributed, statistically...*

A head touched Archie's knee again. He sighed and didn't open his eyes. The pressure of the head lightened as he sighed, then became heavy again.

*The shape of reality is entirely a function of the basic properties of the basic unitary space elements, the voice continued. If every element of reality were to become relatively motionless except one minute particle of the universal swarm, in time the entire universe would again attain its present state of differentiation and complexity...*

Another head had come to rest against his other knee. He opened his eyes mere slits. All ten of the girls were around him, their wide eyes looking at him. They didn't seem aware that he was watching them. He took advantage of that and watched their faces.

THE VOICE of the speaker droned on, but he didn't listen. The adoration and eagerness he had seen in the eyes and expressions of these girls before was in some undefinable manner missing. It was still there, but subtly altered.

He was trying to pin it down. Was

it absentmindedness as they listened to the speaker? It could have been, but for some reason he didn't think so. It was almost that, though. It was as though they were listening to the speaker—or intent on something within their thoughts.

One of the beautiful faces altered for a brief second into lines of anxiety. But only for a brief instant, then it had returned to its expression of adoration. Why?

Because he might open his eyes unexpectedly. That was the answer. And if he did, they must be ready to be adoring. But what did they have to fear? Nothing. They were, he gathered, his wives. They had given every indication of loving him, of being glad he was back again. They fought for his favor in a friendly way, among themselves.

Then why this tenseness when his eyes were closed? He studied them. They all seemed about the same age, around nineteen or twenty. There were subtle differences in their individual beauty that made each a package that would make any man's pulse quicken. Margot was a hag in comparison, and a foul-mouthed vixen to boot.

The thought came to him, either all females in this galaxy were perfect in beauty and form, or these ten were unusual. On Earth it would have taken some doing to gather ten such girls together in one group. The entire world would have had to be combed by experts to pick them out.

The whole world? From all indications Pornz Agla had more than one world, or even a dozen worlds, to do his picking from. If he were a despot...

Maybe that was the answer. What would happen to these girls if they fell out of favor with Pornz? Would they be sent back from where they had

come? Probably not. If that were the only fate in store for them they wouldn't be concealing such terrible anxiety.

The pattern was growing clear. Maybe death would be their fate if they lost favor. Or maybe they would be tossed down to the crew for playthings like in stories of pirates and their women.

Archie closed his eyes tight and tried to concentrate on the speaker and his explanation of the universe. After a while he gave up and opened his eyes.

At once the faces around him grew bright with hope and hints of love. The fear was well-masked, perhaps gone.

He stood up and looked down at the ten upturned faces. Was he right about these girls? A plan was growing in his thoughts. It was risky, but he had to start somewhere.

He scowled down at them and their expressions became more happy, their eyes wider with promise. He stared coldly at one of them. The girl blanched perceptibly.

"You," he said to her. "Take me to my bed. The rest of you get out of my sight."

SHE LAY beside him, her head turned toward him. He had seen her slim body for a brief instant before she had slid under the covers. For one wild moment he had seriously considered forgetting his plan and being Pornz Agla. His breath coming fast, he had reached over and touched her shoulder—and felt it trembling.

He had drawn his hand away, and now she was looking at him, puzzled at his hesitation.

"What's your name?" he asked, throwing caution away. If he were supposed to know it...

"You have forgotten?" she asked,



her teeth chattering. "I—I'm cold," she explained. "My name? It is Zoana, which in my native tongue means *voice of the warm breeze of summer*. Do you recall it now? You remarked on it when..." Her voice drifted off into silence.

She was studying him again with her large round eyes. Abruptly she slid over close to him, her skin touching his. "You want me?" she coaxed.

"And if I didn't?" he asked, lying perfectly still.

Her skin became cold. Her eyes were wide and staring again in the half light. "Please," she said almost inaudibly. "Please don't torture me. Take me. I give myself to you without reservation."

"You didn't answer my question," Archie said. "If I didn't, what would happen to you?"

The touch of her skin was icy cold. "The—the crew, for a while, before—before—"

"Before what?" Archie persisted.

She began trembling uncontrollably. Suddenly she threw back the covers and turned to him, sobbing and beating his chest with her diminutive fists and gasping, "Kill me. Please kill me. I can't stand this torture, knowing that sooner or later it will always be the same for each of us, and all we can do is postpone the inevitable. Oh why couldn't I have been killed by your raiders instead of captured?"

He pulled her down against him and covered her up. He held her face against his neck. She fought him, then became quiet except for her almost inaudible sobs.

"So that's the way it was," Archie said, his voice flat. "I might have guessed."

Her sobbing stopped abruptly. She was very still for long seconds. Then she pushed her head away and lifted

on one elbow, looking into his face with staring, tear brimmed eyes.

"Was it that way with the other nine?" Archie asked.

"But of course? What form of mental torture is this? Of course you are toying with me. You know all this."

"I want to ask you something," Archie said. "What would you do to get to return to your native planet?"

She stared at him incredulously. Abruptly she was laughing, distractedly, hysterically.

"No," Archie said. "I mean it. What would you do?"

She continued laughing, but it was degenerating into sobs. He sat up and took her shoulders in his hands and shook her, aware only of her intense suffering. "Snap out of it," he said.

She quieted slowly. Finally she sat up, looking at him, her face glistening wet with tears.

"What would I do?" She stared around her vaguely. "I don't know. So long ago I lost hope. It couldn't be. I know that. It's something new in you though, Pornz. More cruel than ever before. A new cruelty worthy of the machine."

For a long second Archie hesitated. Then, abruptly, he made up his mind to risk everything.

"Get out of bed," he said. "Get your clothes on. Go get the others. I want all ten of you in here right away."

She sat there, unconscious of her nakedness, a mixture of emotions playing over her features, bewildered at this incomprehensible development.

"Do as I said," Archie ordered sternly, resisting the desire to take her in his arms and assure her everything would be all right.

Like a scared wild animal she jumped out of bed and ran from the room. When she was gone Archie let

out a long sigh. Then he sat up and waited.

THE DOOR opened, finally. A timid face peeked in, started to withdraw, saw that he was watching, and came in a little more.

"Come on in," Archie said. "All ten of you."

They came in, their faces etched with anxiety, and approached the bed. Zoana was dressed once more, in a clinging golden robe. Her trembling was visible.

"I'm going to take a chance," Archie said slowly. "I want you all to listen to me carefully, and I want you to know that every word I'm going to say is the truth. Do you understand?"

There were hesitant nods.

"All right. I'm not Pornz Agla." He stopped and watched for the effect of this bombshell. All it evoked was dumb nods of agreement. He shrugged. "All right, you'll believe me when I get through. My name is Archie Baker. I happen to be the physical double of your so-called master, Pornz Agla. I don't know for sure everything that happened, but I'll tell you what I know and what I think. It seems that Pornz Agla discovered he was going to be caught. I don't know anything about that except that it was pretty inevitable. He fled to the galaxy where my own native planet is, and located me as his fall guy. I didn't realize what was happening, of course. And his plan worked. The Federation ship got me instead of him. They ran an identification on me that checked in every detail. I was put in a cell and the Federation ship started back to wherever it came from to deliver what it thought was the genuine Pornz to whatever justice they dish out.

"I was rescued—as Pornz Agla. Apparently nobody here knows that I'm

not he. And I'm not. You've got to believe that. Now here's why I'm telling you this. I know you could let someone know I'm not Pornz. No telling what might happen then. Maybe I'd be killed. It wouldn't help you girls any, from what you've let slip about the fates in store for you.

"But what I hope is that you'll believe me and keep quiet about it. I need some friends if I'm to stop what's going on. Where I come from a girl has a right to choose her fate. There used to be a time when someone like Pornz could steal girls and keep them as playthings until he tired of them, then turn them over to the crew. I don't go for that. I want you to help me. I don't know how yet, but something will develop. And I want you to know that from now on you don't need to be afraid of me. Whether you're with me or not, I intend to return you to where you came from and try to make amends for what Pornz did to you."

He stopped. They were nodding dumbly. He thought at first they hadn't understood his words. Slowly he realized they had, but couldn't realize yet they were the truth. It would take time.

Pity welled up in him. "You poor kids," he said. "Everything's going to be all right. It's got to be."

"Y-you want one of us tonight?" one of the girls asked.

"No!" Archie shouted, irritated. Then he realized how hurt, how hopeless, these girls had been. "No," he said tenderly. "The only girl I will ever want is one who knows she can refuse me, laugh in my face, insult me, or do anything she wants, and have no fear of punishment. Now go back to your rooms—or stay here if you wish. But let me get some sleep. By morning maybe you'll realize I've told

you the truth. I know. It will take time for you to hope again. But you will."

He slid down under the covers and turned on his stomach, cradling his head in his arms. A long time later he went to sleep.

**H**E AWOKED to the sound of Tarc Blum's booming laugh. The giant was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, fists on hips, still roaring with laughter. He stopped long enough to gasp, "I'd never have thought any man was man enough."

Archie became aware of the cause of Tarc's mirth. On either side of him were two girls. Curled up at the foot of the bed were others. Couches had been brought next to the bed to hold the rest. All ten girls had stayed as close to him as they could get while he slept.

His heart leaped. They *had* understood, and believed him. He saw it in their eyes as they smiled shyly at him now.

Tarc put another meaning on things, and it was just as well that he did. Archie decided to play out the part. "Get out and leave my private amusement to myself," he ordered, grinning at Tarc.

"Darned if I will," Tarc roared, rushing forward. "I've been waiting for the time you would be so weak a baby could handle you. It's now or never." His eyes were bright with laughter as the girls scampered out of the way.

Tarc sent the blankets across the room with one casual flick and before Archie quite realized what was happening he was flying in a circle around Tarc, who was holding him by one ankle.

A cold finger of fear touched Archie. Underneath Tarc's playful exterior was

this a deliberate attempt at assassination?

Fighting the centrifugal force of the spin, Archie doubled and reached for his imprisoned ankle, touched it, then in a surge of effort reached past it and gripped Tarc's thick wrist. As he gripped it he looked triumphantly at the giant. There was delighted surprise in those eyes, nothing more.

In another constrictive surge Archie freed his ankle and in a serpentine undulation turned himself over twice, twisting Tarc's wrist and arm.

The next instant he had forgotten his surroundings and was in the ring. His feet touched the floor. Tarc was turning over in the air. He could have snapped his spine against the floor, but in a swift movement Archie sent the sprawling giant end over end to land on the bed.

The giant Tarc sat up slowly, rubbing his massive arm, the grin still there. He looked from Archie to the ten girls cowering in fright against the far wall, and back again. "You seem to have picked up a trick or two since the last time you threw me," he said. His grin broadened. "And you certainly haven't lost your skill."

Archie thought of the real Pornz Agla who had gone into the ring against Zomby, the walking dead man from central Africa. The Zomby (actually from the Bronx, and one of the most cunning wretlers in the country) could conceivably have shown the real Pornz some new tricks. But now Archie could understand how Pornz had been able to enter the ring and expect to pass himself off as Archie.

Tarc got up off the bed. "Now that you're thoroughly awake," he said, "I'll wait for you in the living room. Don't be long. We have plans to make. The machine has given new orders."

Archie watched him depart. What

was the machine? The term had been used before. But not in the sense implied now. The machine had given new orders. . . . It must be something similar to a political machine back on earth. Of course it had to be that! No pirate like Pornz could operate successfully without backing and real brains to direct his strategies. Undoubtedly the machine told Pornz where to strike; and when he had conquered and looted to his satisfaction the machine took over, making another slave planet in the empire being cut from the body of the Federation.

There was something wrong with this explanation. Something not accounted for. He couldn't place his finger on it. Maybe the girls could help him.

"What is this machine Tarc mentioned?" he asked.

They looked at him, and at one another. Zoana spoke. "It is a giant brain," she said. "Pornz has boasted that it is as large as a planet. It directs the conquest of the galaxy, and rules the conquered planets."

"What role did Pornz play in this?" Archie asked.

"He was the Admiral of the fleet," Zoana said. "He actually did very little that we could see. Tarc is in command of this ship, just as each of the other ships has its captain. The machine gives its orders through a teletype in the ship control center."

"Then," Archie said, relieved, "I don't have to worry about any responsibility?"

"Pornz never did," Zoana said. "He would get mad if Tarc even asked him for advice, and order him to use his own wits."

"Good!" Archie said.

**T**ARC WAS listening to some music that Archie had heard while im-

prisoned in the Federation ship. He shut off the music when Archie came in.

"These orders came an hour ago," he said, extending a slip of yellow paper.

YOU WILL USE PLAN SEVEN TO CAPTURE THE FIFTH PLANET OF THE STAR Q3R74C833259.

Archie nodded as though he understood what it was all about.

"That planet is right in the thick of the Federation defenses," Tarc said, uneasiness creeping into his voice. "Plan Seven could do it—if anything can. I don't know much like it though."

Archie shrugged and risked a question. "Why would the machine pick that planet?"

"I looked it up," Tarc said. "Population seven billion humans and one billion *darfs*. They have five positron collection centers that produce a tenth of an ounce of positrons a year—enough for the time travel units on all our ships, though we already have that much from the positron plants on our planet. That's why I'm uneasy. We'll run into everything the Federation's got in the way of defense."

"Suppose we don't do it then," Archie suggested, smiling enigmatically so that Tarc could take it any way he wanted to.

A shocked light appeared in the giant's eyes. "Don't say that, even in jest," he warned. When Archie's smile broadened Tarc took it as being a joke and exhaled a sigh of relief. "I guess I was forgetting," he said. "It's like worrying whether the laws of reality will change. Only the machine knows what it is doing. We do what it tells us, or else."

Archie risked a vague remark. "I've often wondered about the machine. . . ."

"Haven't we all," Tarc murmured.



"Let's have some elixir and get started."

"Okay," Archie said, going to the cabinet and getting the bottles and glasses. When he handed Tarc his glass he said, "But I mean it. What do you think—about the machine?"

"I think it's inevitable," Tarc said, tasting the elixir, then downing it.

"Of course," Archie conceded—although he knew what Tarc meant. "But that isn't what I meant."

"I know," Tarc said uncomfortably. "After all, we've skirted this before. . . We can speculate forever and it won't answer the question. Who or what built the machine? Something had to, since it couldn't have built itself. What motives or directives are integrated into it only time will tell—if that. I can't conceive of any living intelligence creating the machine and letting it get out of hand. I've wondered who or what stands in back of it. So have you." He looked broodingly down at his empty glass. "What do we care, so long as it provides the elixir?"

"Have another bottle," Archie suggested.

Tarc stared at him. "You *are* in a bad mood today, Pornz, suggesting I drink a second bottle the same day." He shuddered. "Remember that poor devil you made drink two bottles?"

Archie shrugged indifferently as though he remembered and it didn't bother him. Suddenly he wanted to be alone. He had to do a lot of thinking before he got too far beyond his depth.

"Get the fleet started on plan Seven," he said.

"Okay, Pornz," Tarc said with evident relief. He went to the elevator without a backward glance.

Archie was alone for the first time since he had been taken from his prison cell on the Federation ship. He let

his features relax into a thoughtful scowl.

IT WAS evident now that the machine was literally a machine. A robot brain capable of handling the complex problems of conquest of a galaxy. Capable of searching many galaxies until it found the perfect physical duplicate of Pornz Agla. . .

That was another problem. Did the machine know he wasn't Agla? If it did, why had it put him in Agla's place of power and give him the leeway to perhaps sabotage its plans for conquest?

Or had Pornz Agla in some way outwitted the machine so that it believed him to really be Agla? There was no way of answering that question. Not now, at any rate.

Tarc had touched on an intriguing point. A machine obviously couldn't bring itself into existence. A living man could bring himself into existence in nature through the process of evolution. Never a machine.

But a robot brain could be brought into existence and get out of hand, destroying its creator and going on alone with its ambitions. Or could it? Archie had no way of knowing. He had read newspaper articles on giant calculators. On Earth they hadn't reached the level of thinking for themselves though.

He returned to the problem of whether the machine knew he was Archie. Maybe the machine knew it and felt he would slip into the role and follow orders. If it expected that, it didn't know him.

But how could he combat the machine? Obviously the Federation was combatting it without much success. Tarc had said the machine had dense alarms, whatever that meant, that protected it from everything the Federa-

tion had. And it had given that secret to them...

A feeling of helplessness grew in Archie. How could he hope to do anything when he knew less than the average child in this galaxy about the elementary facts of nature?

Dense alarms, free travel in five dimensions, hypertubes of inertronic force, totally empty hyperplanes—that at least was graspable. A hyperplane was a three-dimensional space. A totally empty three dimensional space was probably one where there was no matter and no force of any kind. Pure extension and nothing else. Fields didn't exist there, so that electrons and protons and the other basic units of matter had no fields to hold them together.

How could he begin to make plans? The girls, though they were on his side and would remain loyal in the hopes of eventually returning to their homelands, were obviously unable to tell him much, or even do anything much to help him.

A planet of the Federation was going to be captured. It would have men on it with the know-how to at least help him start toward his goal of destroying the machine and freeing the galaxy of its threat...

He would have to feel his way cautiously. He might be able to gain some allies on that planet...

**"T**HERE IT is," Tarc said quietly.

Archie studied the planet on the viewscreen. It was nostalgically similar to the Earth. Large land masses, oceans, and white clouds.

Tarc nodded to the technician operating the screen. The planet was replaced by a closeup view of a large city whose tall buildings and geometrical layout wavering wildly due to the magnification.

"The Capitol," Tarc explained. "They don't know we're here yet. Maybe they won't. Our periscope dips into their plane only eighty times a second, and then only for two millionths of a second for one scanning. Their radars will bring any contact in to them as vague static. In time they'll wonder about it and locate it, but by then it will be over."

Archie nodded as though he knew just what Tarc was talking about.

"Their main defenses, of course," Tarc went on, "are the Federation ships. The planet installations are good only for the last phase when we have to land to take over. We should be running into a Federation ship almost any time now. We're moving in a nonsense frequency hyperwise that makes us impossible to stick with, but the very laws of probability dictate that before long we'll approximate the hyper-trajectory of the Federation ship for a few seconds. We'll probably get him before he can sound the alarm, but that won't last."

The technician switched the screens to a view of the fleet. It was a comforting sight. Over a hundred bright yellow needles with their four huge fins at the stern and the thin pencil of exhaust particles.

Suddenly a brilliant red sphere materialized. A thin line of white erupted from it just as its smooth surface was torn apart in an explosion that was unreal in its soundlessness.

"He got two of our ships," Tarc said tensely.

Archie stared dumbly at the fleet. It seemed the same. The whole incident had taken place in a split second—too fast for the eye to follow in detail.

Tarc licked his lips nervously. "Our score isn't good so far," he said. He listened to the sound of an alarm

somewhere. "We're in for it now," he said. "That ship was integrated. They miss it. They'll tie their hyper-vectors now. It means we have to do the same. When it comes it'll be all at once. Fortunately we have the edge with the dense defense. We can choose our own instant."

Without warning Archie saw hundreds of red spheres in the screen, looking like opaque soap bubbles caught by a still camera. Straight lines of white brilliance radiated from them. They all burst silently like soap bubbles, and the ragged remnants vanished. It had taken less than the space of a heartbeat.

Archie's eyes jerked to the screens showing his own fleet. Less than half of the yellow ships were visible.

"Expensive," Tarc muttered. "We have half an hour to take the planet now before a new fleets comes. We can just do it. The land rays can't be used close to a horizon. We can materialize under them. The Federation will abandon the planet rather than let the population be destroyed. That's all we have in our favor."

Seconds passed during which the remains of the fleet drifted out until it formed points on a giant sphere, jets toward the center and going full blast without the ships seeming to move.

Tarc held his breath. "Now!" he said suddenly.

In the next instant Archie was seeing ordinary landscape in the radial screens. Distant snow capped mountains, nearer valleys and highways. In the forward screen were white clouds. A broad beam of white cut through the clouds, causing them to vanish and leave only the blue sky. A sound of distant thunder vibrated through the ship.

Tarc laughed gloatingly. "Got them,"

he said. "Now to consolidate our positions."

Abruptly jet trails were radiating out from the ship by the hundreds, at the head of each a small silver projectile.

"They have ten minutes to capture the land based rays," Tarc mused. "Even if they don't we're already impregnable. A Federation ship would have to destroy a thousand square miles of densely populated area to destroy any one of our ships."

Five minutes passed. Abruptly a loudspeaker blared, "They capitulate!"

"Good!" Tarc said. "Now we wait for the arrival of the Federation reserve fleet. Maybe they've learned though..."

It appeared they had learned. An hour later there was no sign of them. Shortly after that a message was relayed from the Capitol that a trans-temporal message had been received from the Federation conceding loss of the planet.

Archie felt numb. Things had happened with unbelievable rapidity and breathtaking precision. This had been war with the refinements of millions of years. The embryonic guided missiles being developed on the Earth were clumsy in comparison. In fact, there could be no comparison.

You might as well compare the development of science of the great apes and the United States, Archie thought.

"And now," Tarc broke into his thoughts, "since you are now known to the Federation, you may as well receive the official surrender in person. How about setting the date for tomorrow morning at sunrise in the Capitol? We haven't seen a sunrise on a planet for months."

"Why not?" Archie said.

"After that you can relax," Tarc said. "The rest of us will take care of

the liquidation of the Federation leaders here and the installing of our own." He winked knowingly. "We'll bring you a couple of beauties, too. Best on the planet."

Archie opened his mouth to say something and didn't know just what to say. He needed time to think.

"We'll talk about details later," he stalled. "I'm going back to my quarters."

**T**HE GIRLS surrounded him with anxious expressions on their pretty faces.

"I wish I knew what to do," Archie groaned. "Everything happened too fast for me. And now it seems the Federation leaders are to be liquidated. What can I do?"

"Pornz had his secret ways of coming and going," one of the girls said timidly.

"He did?" Archie said. "I wondered. Tarc seems to take too much command of things. I was wondering how Pornz handled him. Do any of you know anything about how Pornz got around him?"

"Once when Pornz was boasting to us," another girl said, "he boasted that if anything happened to the machine he had a hideout set on every planet he had landed on. And he had a secret way of getting off the ship, too."

"From this very room," Zoana said. "He would lock us in our quarters before going. But once he was in a hurry and Lota was able to hide and watch. He went over to that corner and touched something, and disappeared."

"Yes," another girl said. "That's right. I did."

"Can you show me what he did, Lota?" Archie asked.

He followed her to the corner, the

other girls crowding close to him as though they felt safer when close enough to meet any fate he met.

"He touched this," Lota said, pointing to a small discolored spot on the wall.

"Okay," Archie said. "Now all of you go to your quarters and watch."

They shook their heads. Zoana said, "If anything happens we want to be with you, Archie."

He felt a twinge of pleasure. It was the first time they had called him by his own name.

"All right," he said. "Here goes."

He touched the discolored spot. The luxurious surroundings vanished. In their place was a bare steel hold containing a small ship.

"I might have guessed," Archie said, remembering his prison cell.

He spent five minutes exploring the hold. There seemed no means of exit for the ship.

"Time travel," Zoana said, guessing his problem. "The controls are probably in the ship itself. Let's go in."

They crowded through the airlock. Archie chuckled. The girls were already accepting their new freedom from fear—or perhaps just testing it, ready to retreat from it if he objected.

Zoana examined the control panel. "I used to have a small ship like this," she said. "This is an older model, but has the same layout."

"You could run it?" Archie asked. When she nodded he said, "All right, go ahead and take over. But wait... How will we get back here? We have to, you know."

"I can do it," Zoana said. "I think I'll send the ship back a few days."

She touched a bright blue stud. A smooth hum became tangible. It faded into inaudibility. Blank viewcreens



came to life, showing the walls of the hold the ship was in.

"First I'll send the screens back a few hours so we can fix where we are in relation to the landscape," Zoana explained. "It will go on the tape, and when we want the ship back in this position the pilot will maneuver it until the screens correspond with the tape."

The other nine girls crowded close to Archie, watching her as she deftly manipulated the controls. In a few seconds the viewscreens brought an unobstructed view of the ground a thousand feet below, and the distant mountains.

Zoana pressed a green button. "Now it's fixed," she said. "We can come back to this position and time and go ahead in time to our current present. Now I'll send the ship itself back until it's free."

**A**N INSTANT later the viewscreens began to show rapidly moving scenery. The ground below rushed up toward them momentarily, then dropped away as the ship took flight.

"Where to?" Zoana said, turning sparkling eyes up at him.

Archie hesitated, grinning at the circle of excited faces.

"We're before the invasion," Zoana said. "We can go anywhere and they'll think we belong here."

"We're before the invasion?" Archie echoed, puzzled. "You mean you took us back in time to before our fleet captured this planet?"

Zoana nodded.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Archie said. "Of course! This is the way to do what I wanted to! We have to contact the Federaton leaders."

"But they'll kill you!" several of the girls gasped.

"Before the invasion?" Archie said. "They didn't, or I wouldn't have been in the invasion."

"Oh yes you would," Zoana said. "Your time-line is doubled in this. Right now you're on the big ship out in space preparing for the invasion, as well as down here. If you're killed down here it doesn't affect the other time-line at all."

"That goes for all of us," another girl said.

Archie threw up his hands in resignation. "Then what's the use of going anywhere? We can't change anything."

"No," Zoana said, "you can't change anything. But you don't know how much of anything that happened was affected by you."

"All right," Archie said. "Let's go to the Capitol. I want to talk with the Federation leaders."

"But..." Zoana hesitated. She saw the determination in Archie's eyes and turned to the controls.

The countryside sped by below them. Archie watched it with fascinated interest. It could have been the Earth. Fields were laid out in squares, colored in various shades of green and brown and black from the crops and the types of soil. There were farm buildings.

They passed over small cities and winding rivers and narrow ribbons of highways on which ant-like vehicles crawled. Now and then they saw another small ship in the air. No one seemed to be alarmed by their passage.

They dipped over the crest of a mountain range and dived into a valley thousands of feet below. A large lake that seemed a jagged edged blue jewel gleamed up at them from the carpet of a forest.

"We could land by the lake," Zoana said. She looked up at Archie, her lips trembling on a smile. "We could go back another day and spend a whole day here without losing an instant."

On impulse Archie nodded. Zoana had expressed his own desire.

**S**HE SET the ship down on a sandy beach near the concealment of tall pines. Then she did something to the controls. A pointer on an instrument moved backwards.

"We're a day before we landed here," she said. "I kept the alarms on. Nothing will come near us for the time we're here. We can relax."

A few moments later Archie was standing on the beach, sniffing the pine-scented breeze. He felt just a little heavy. This planet's gravity was slightly greater than the Earth's.

A few yards from shore a fish splashed the surface of the lake. In the momentary glimpse he had of it it looked like a lake trout. Was there a common origin to all life? Or were there only certain avenues of evolution possible, and life on different worlds, having separate origins, pursued the same evolutionary lines?

He turned to ask the girls, and gasped. Their clothes were lying on the sand. They were running past him, fleet flashes of nakedness, as they dived into the water.

He watched them disappear, and their heads bob up to the surface. He listened to their shrieks of laughter, their happy voices.

"Archie!" one of them called. "Take off your clothes and come into the water. It's wonderful!"

"Get out of there and put your clothes on!" he ordered sternly. "We're going to have a little respectability here."

Their shrieks of laughter answered him. Then they began conspiring in low tones which he nevertheless heard. They were going to come out and drag him in:

He turned and ran toward the ship,

but they caught up with him and held on. They were unafraid, knowing by now that he wasn't the type to hurt them.

Their faces flushed with exertion, they yanked at his clothing until he was undressed.

He broke away from them and ran to the water's edge, going in in a long shallow dive. The water was clean and cool and refreshing. He took a deep breath and dived under the surface. The bottom was a fairyland of sparkling jewels, green plants, and fish, some of them familiar in form, others utterly strange.

A small creature shaped like a sea-horse, but with small arms and human-like fingers looked at him with large startled eyes, then darted away.

Another figure appeared in his range of vision. It was one of the girls. She turned toward him, saw him, and swam toward him, her lips smiling impishly.

He shoved to the surface. As his head broke water he felt hands touch him, arms circle him. He struggled free. The girl's head broke water. She laughed at him, her eyes sparkling.

The others were swimming toward him now. He evaded them and swam away from shore in a slow Australian crawl which they couldn't equal.

When he was a safe distance from them he stopped to laugh at them.

Suddenly Zoana screamed. "My leg! I've got a cramp!" She went down, struggled to the surface again.

Alarmed, Archie swam to her. "Relax," he said. "I've got you."

She threw her arms around his neck.

"Don't get panicky," he said. "I'll take you to shore."

Her face was scant inches from his. Her eyes looked at him adoringly. There was no alarm or suffering in her expression.

"Why you little..." he said. "You didn't have a cramp at all!"

"But I had a good idea," she purred.

**T**HEY GREW tired of swimming.

When they climbed out of the water Archie studiously avoided looking at them, but was beginning to feel foolish about his sense of propriety. They were impish nymphs, uninhibited and happy. A lump rose in his throat as he realized that if it weren't for him they would still be faced with a fate that should never be possible.

Together they explored the forest near the shore. They found wild vegetables that the girls recognized. It was Archie, however, who designed fish-hooks and showed them how to catch fish.

At sundown he built a campfire, the girls industriously gathering twigs until they had a pile big enough to last for hours. He showed them how to cook the food that had been collected.

They ate, and they watched two small moons grow bright in the sky overhead, and the stars come out. Zoana began humming a tune. The humming became a song. The other girls joined in. They drifted into another song, and another that Archie had learned in his cell on the Federation ship. He joined in.

One of the small moons dropped below the horizon. Another and quite large one came up above the silhouettes of the pines. Archy unconsciously began singing, "When the moon comes over the mountain," and the girls stopped singing to listen.

He learned all their names. Zoana, Lota, Awa, Moar, Feyi, Anna, Aris, Begt, Woowis, and Fi. He let them snuggle against him with luxurious sighs of contentment. He wondered how he could choose among them if the time ever came that he could.

"Archie," the one named Feyi said dreamily, "do you remember what you said about the girl you will want?"

"What did I say?" he said absently.

Feyi laughed. "You know what you said. We aren't afraid of you now. And we all love you—more than life or homeland." Her voice choked with emotion.

"And I love you," Archie said gently. "All of you."

"That's what we wanted to hear," Zoana said. "We've talked it over. We want to be your wives."

"All of you?" Archie said, shocked.

"All of us," Zoana said. "And why not? If you love all of us, which of us would you choose? And," she added shyly, "which nine of us would you discard—and forget?"

"Is the idea so strange to you?" Anna asked.

"To me, yes," Archie said uncomfortably, "though—"

"Yes?" Anna prompted.

"In some places on the Earth polygamy is practiced. Men have harems. King Solomon was reputed to have a thousand wives."

"Then it's settled," Anna said smugly. "We'll all be very happy together and bear you many children. We can have our slaves build us a place here on the shore when you have destroyed the machine."

"Maybe," Archie grunted, and he wondered uncomfortably if maybe some part of him didn't want that.

But ten wives! What, Archie wondered, did one do with ten women...

**H**E BLINKED against the painful brightness of the sun and tried to sit up. A double row of pretty faces rested near him. Ten heads of glistening luxurious hair in varying shades from rich auburn to glossy black.

His arms were pinned under their

shoulders. They were huddled together for warmth, and against him. He felt like a huge dog that was owned by ten kids. He had the facetious impulse to bark like a Great Dane and wake them up.

Abruptly another emotion dominated him. He did love them. All ten of them. Like daughters? He knew that wasn't so. His pulse quickened at the memory of yesterday as they flashed by him to dive into the blue waters of the lake.

He lifted his head, careful not to disturb the girls, and looked across the sand at the lake. It would be nice to build a rambling house right here and spend the rest of his life.

Sudden recollection of a dream made him smile. The girls had been sprawled around a table. He had sat in the middle. They had been smoking and drinking and talking like tough poker players, and he had sat there unable to escape.

He saw now in their positions around him that maybe the dream had been born of his subconscious realization of their being huddled around him.

Abruptly he shook himself. Ten pairs of eyes opened. Ten pretty mouths opened in yawns that revealed gleaming white teeth. The girls sat up. He tried to move his arms. They were asleep. Numb.

"Now look what you've done," he growled. "My arms are asleep. I can't do a thing with them."

"You can't?" Zoana said. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him full on the lips.

"Me next," another shouted, pulling Zoana away.

Archie struggled to his feet, dragging them with him, and shook them off. They lay where they had fallen in the sand, looking up at him and laughing at him and at one another.

Grumbling, he worked circulation back into his arms.

Feyi of the auburn hair stood up and divested herself of her dress in one movement. She paused to stretch, taking in a deep breath, then ran swiftly to the shore and ran out into the water until it tripped her and she plunged into it.

The others were doing the same. Archie hesitated, then decided. Why not? The short dip sent the blood tingling through his skin. He came out of the water after a short swim and dressed. He had the fire going again and a heap of vegetables roasting by the time the girls had come out and dressed.

When they had all eaten he stood up. Their gay chatter stopped abruptly. They looked up at him with grave eyes, seeing that the picnic was over.

"Why can't we stay here forever?" Begt said.

But it was time to go and they knew it.

**Z**OANA TOOK the controls of the ship again and lifted it above the lake, circling the full perimeter in a last wistful farewell. An animal very much like a large antlered deer, drinking at the lake's edge on the farther shore, looked up at the ship, then turned and plunged into the forest.

Zoana headed the ship into the morning sun at ten thousand feet and kept it on a straight course. The girls watched the viewscreens, quiet and subdued. They were worried.

"How about the language spoken here?" Archie asked. "Will it be the one we speak?"

"Of course!" Zoana said, surprised. "There are the local languages, of course; but everyone is taught the universal one, or else submits to the transplant."



"What's that?" Archie asked.

"Cortical transplant," she explained.

"A section of living cortex is inserted hyper-wise. It's fed artificially until it knits to the cortex. The only bad effect is that it produces headaches for a while and makes a sensitive spot on the head. But the skin isn't cut. Hyper-surgery from adjacent three-space can reach any part of the body because every cell is spread out against hyperspace like the surface of a thin sheet of paper."

"So that's how it was done!" Archie exclaimed. He told them about the things that had happened to him before he had been caught by the Federation police.

They laughed gleefully.

"It's all so simple," Lota said. "The real Pornz or whoever was with him followed you around and stopped the motors and the phones from working by shorting them from hyperspace."

All too quickly the skyscrapers of the Capitol rose above the horizon. The girls looked up at Archie, waiting for his orders.

"I wonder if we shouldn't land outside the city and go in cautiously," he said. "It would be better if we could get in touch with some official without attracting too much attention."

"Let's listen to the news," Zoana suggested. "Maybe we can decide then."

The only pertinent fact they gained from a half hour of news was the name of the planet President. Oban Hollin.

"We've got that much," Archie said. "Let's land out here. There's an open field down there near a house."

A FARMER who might have been born and raised in Illinois ran out into the field where they landed. As they emerged from the ship he shout-

ed angry words at them in a language they couldn't understand.

"Switch to universal," Fi shouted at him.

"I might have known it," he said. "From some other darn planet. You're ruining my crop."

"Sorry," Archie said. "It's an emergency. We've got to get in touch with Oban Hollin."

"The President?" the farmer said with new respect. "Why don't you use your radiophone?"

"Because there might be machine spies listening in," Zoana said in an urgent whisper. "We would be killed before we could get to him."

The farmer blinked. "Come to the house with me," he said. "I know a fellow who used to be acquainted with Hollin before we was elected President. Maybe we can get this done right."

Archie congratulated himself on his good luck. In the house the farmer made a phone call. Fifteen minutes later the phone rang. Oban Hollin himself was on the line.

"Let me talk to him," Zoana said. She took the receiver. "Mr. President," she said, "we've got to talk with you in private. I can't tell you anything over the phone, except to say that we have escaped temporarily from the machine and must tell you some things right away. Can you come out here without attracting any fuss? More than I can tell you depends on our talking with you right away, within the next few hours."

Archie had his ear near the receiver. He heard a pleasant masculine voice say, "I suppose it's possible, but couldn't you tell me more? Who are you, by the way?"

Zoana laughed nervously. "I can't even tell you that. If I did you might not listen to us, but put us in jail and ship us off to the Central Government."

And that would be fatal. To us, and maybe to the Federation."

Hollin's voice became abruptly stern. "I'm going to listen to what you have to say," he said, "but under circumstances of my own choosing."

Men in bright red uniforms materialized around them. The farmer chuckled goodnaturedly. "I could have warned you," he said. "I recognized you right away, Pornz Agla. Your picture has been pushed into my eyes on every t.v. broadcast for months."

Archie groaned in self accusation.

"You should have stayed hidden in the ship," the farmer chortled. "I would have been a pushover for them pretty girls."

"Anyway," Zoana said with great dignity, "President Hollin promised to hear what we have to say."

"That's right," one of the police agreed. "Our orders are to take you to the Capitol. Come along."

"**YOU SAY** that you came back from the time the invasion was accomplished?" the tall gray haired President said.

"Yes," Archie said.

"Hmm. I've heard rumors of you making secret deals like this, Agla. Sparing certain officials' lives in exchange for guarantees in case the machine ever is destroyed."

"I'm not Pornz Agla," Archie said.

"That's what you said. Our identification says you are."

"You've got to believe me," Archie insisted. "Agla and the machine searched three galaxies before they found me. I'm his double, down to the microscopic details of the hair, and the fingerprints."

"He isn't Pornz," the girls said. "And we should know."

Hollin listened while they told their story. When they finished Archie saw that he was convinced.

"But I don't see how it can affect anything," the President said. "You don't even have the learning of a child of our planet."

"I realize that," Archie said. "But maybe I have something none of your most learned scientists have."

Hollin nodded. "I think I know what you mean. What do you have in mind?"

"What is this machine?" Archie asked.

"As nearly as we can gather, it's a non-living brain with the unlimited ability to handle complexities of any modern thinking machine, plus directives that amount to the same as its having a will of its own. It's been in existence now for around three thousand years and has captured over forty thousand Federation planets, plus all the eighteen thousand independent planets. In other words, it now holds almost a third of all the inhabited planets of our galaxy."

The calm statistics sent a surge of dismay through Archie. He hadn't quite realized the vastness of things.

"Can't you locate this brain and destroy it?" he asked.

Hollin shook his head. "You don't realize some of the simplest things. Communication, for example. Radiation points can broadcast from a nonsense hyper-point, and only receivers on the same nonsense variation can get the message. Such sequences are infinite in variation. The Federation employs them too. No one on this planet will ever get a message that could fix the location of the machine until we are a slave planet of the machine. Then it will be too late. The Federation couldn't recapture the planet. The machine would destroy it first."

"That's it!" Archie said. "Tomorrow you become a slave planet. I'm to receive your surrender then."

"And I'm to be liquidated," Hollin said, his voice dull.

"Maybe I can prevent that," Archie said.

Hollin shook his head. "You can't deviate one bit from your expected behavior pattern or they'll know."

"I don't care. I'm going to see that you live."

Again Hollin shook his head. "No. But this is what I'll do. There's time. My best men will go underground. They'll work on the hope that maybe you can do what the Federation can't. You can make occasional trips here for more women. They'll let you know somehow if they've got a fix."

"All right," Archie said. "You go underground with them."

"I'll do my part," Hollin said. He held out his hand.

**Z**OANA BROUGHT the ship to a hovering stop in midair. She and the other girls had wanted to stop at the lake again for a day. Archie had grimly said no.

The ship slid this way and that slowly. Abruptly it became stationary as electric scanners identified the correct coordinates and sent the ship ahead in time.

The steel walls of the hold appeared in the viewcreens. The needle on the instrument that registered the time coordinate crept another minute distance. A white light blinked once.

"We're here," Zoana said.

They got out of the ship and went to the corner where they had first materialized here. Archie punched the plainly visible black button. The metal walled hold vanished, to be replaced by the luxuries of the living quarters.

Across the room the elevator doors slid open. Tarc Blum's giant frame filled it as he stepped out.

The girls scampered to their quarters as Tarc boomed, "Are you ready

to go? We're to receive the surrender of the President in half an hour."

"Okay," Archie said. "Let's have another bottle of elixir before we go." He grinned.

Tarc's face turned gray. "Your humor is getting sadistic, Pornz. Do you really want to see every cell in me turn cancerous and change me in the space of minutes into something that'll drive you mad just to watch?"

"Why not?" Archie murmured. "I'll drink it myself."

He went to the cabinet while Tarc watched him. He took out a bottle of the sparkling fluid and a glass. He poured it, grinning at the giant.

"You're kidding, of course," Tarc said suspiciously.

"No," Archie said. He lifted the glass to his lips.

Then abruptly he realized the trap he had made for himself. If what Tarc had said about the effects of a second bottle in one day was true, drinking it would give away the fact that he had lived two days in a few hours or less.

Should he lower the glass and pretend he had been bluffing? The question was answered for him. Tarc's huge hand struck the glass away. It shattered against a far wall; its contents making wet streaks.

Archie laughed. "I'm surprised at you, Tarc. I thought your nerves were steadier than that."

"I would have sworn you intended to drink it," Tarc muttered. "But you wouldn't... unless—" He turned away toward the elevator. "Let's go. You should be looking forward to this ceremony. I hear the President has made public his intention of killing himself in front of you after the surrender."

Archie's vacant grin vanished. He was fully determined to save Hollin, no matter what the cost.

Tarc turned with his face wreathed in smiles. "I thought that would get you. An insult like that would never be forgotten." He was his old self again, his vague suspicion forgotten.

Or was it? On the way down in the elevator Archie puzzled about the giant. He wished there were some way to find out more about the events leading up to the real Pornz Agla fleeing. As he gazed at Tarc's broad back in the elevator he had a strong feeling that the giant knew far more than he seemed to. Maybe he knew everything...

From the moment the elevator stopped and its doors opened there was no time for speculation. A natty guard of honor was lined up. Electronic cameras were recording the whole thing.

"A global hookup," Tarc whispered. "You're the conqueror."

**THEY ENTERED** the small ship and it was shot out through its port. A half hour later Archie once again saw the skyline of the Capitol. He glanced down at the field where his smaller ship had landed. There were still visible skid marks.

The ship was already dipping toward the city. It slid with breathtaking speed between spires of fairy-like buildings toward the central airport. In the sidescreens Archie saw wings creep out into view. In the bottom-screen he saw huge wheels come down. Once more he was experiencing the miracle of thousands of years of perfection of detail in function and design.

The ship landed without perceptible jar, pivoted slowly, and crept toward the crowd at the far end of the field. Finally it stopped. Archie could make out faces. He searched for Hollin, and saw him, standing slightly in front of the others.

He sighed with relief. It wasn't too late. Hollin was still alive.

A whole side of the ship slid open. A ramp emerged from some hidden dimension. Tarc motioned with a jerk of his head, and Archie, taking his cue, led the way down the ramp.

President Hollin advanced toward him, holding, of all things, an ornate sword across his outstretched palms. Here, thousands of lightyears from the Earth, in another galaxy, the ceremony of surrender was the same!

Archie looked sharply at Hollin. The man looked even more distinguished than he did the first time. His finely molded head was held high. His eyes looked directly into Archie's. Was he trying to convey some information.

"I am the President of this planet, Miorty, of the Federation," Hollin said in a clear voice that would carry to the nearby microphones. "In view, Pornz Agla, of the *accomplished fact* of your having succeeded in *all* you attempted, I, as the constituted head of the Government, surrender my symbol of authority."

He stepped forward and handed the sword to Archie.

Conscious of the thousands of eyes upon him, Archie took the sword.

"Run me through," Archie heard the voice, but there was no movement of Hollin's lips. "I'll die of poison in another second anyway. It isn't murder. Run me through for your own security."

Archie stared at Hollin in surprise at this unexpected move. He saw the man's eyes start to glaze over. He saw him start to fall. He saw the logic of Hollin's command, but even so he couldn't do it.

A figure brushed him aside and seized the sword from his limp hand. It was Tarc. With a fierce cry of ex-

hultation Tarc ran the sword through Hollin's chest up to the hilt, then with a mighty heave lifted sword and man over his head and held them there.

The giant seemed to have grown. It was an illusion. But for an instant he seemed ten feet tall, the sword held high, the dying President moving in pathetic movements for a brief second before his figure relaxed in death.

Then, with a roar, Tarc jerked his arm, sending the body flying fifteen feet toward the frozen spectators, but retaining the sword. With elaborate motions he wiped it on the grass, then tossed it into the air and caught it by the blade, and handed it back to Archie.

Numbly Archie took it. Tarc stepped to his side and faced the crowd and the cameras. "My master!" he roared. "My master, Pornz Agla. My master—and yours!"

**"YOU MUST** get it out of your thoughts," Lota said worriedly.

"I can't," Archie groaned. "When I close my eyes I see Hollin lifted up on that sword. I would like to kill Tarc with my bare hands."

"And condemn more thousands of worlds to eternal slavery under the machine?" Awa said coldly.

"I know. I know," Archie said.

"Let us help you forget," Feyi coaxed.

Archie backed away. The girls laughed deliciously, taking great enjoyment in their knowledge of his embarrassment with them.

"If you have no love for us—" Zoana began.

"But I do, damn it," Archie said. "You little she devils know that and take advantage of it."

"If you have no love for us," Zoana repeated firmly, "perhaps the one they give you from this world will excite

you. We were listening on the radio this morning. We saw her on the screen. Miss Miorty, the most beautiful girl on all Miorty."

"I won't accept her," Archie said grimly.

"Then your crew will insist on having her," Awa said unconcernedly.

"Like hell. I'm sending her back home."

"And have everyone know you're not Pornz?" Lota said. "You have to take her."

"She has a beautiful name, too," Moar said. "Illya. I hear she is to be delivered to you this morning."

"I won't have her," Archie said. "God! Ten of you are enough." A speculative gleam came into his eyes. "Maybe I should do something about it. I think I'll toss half of you to the crew."

The soft warning gong of the elevator interrupted them. Archie turned to see who was coming up. The doors slid open. Tarc stepped out, dragging a girl by one wrist.

"Here's your new plaything, Pornz," he said casually. He shoved the girl mildly forward and ignored her. His eyes surveyed the other ten disgustedly. "Someday," he said, "I'm going back to my own planet and pick me out a real woman."

With a wolfish grin he turned and entered the elevator.

Zoana fell to the floor and crawled to Archie's feet. She looked up at him with wide eyes. "Please don't give me to the crew," she pleaded. "Make it one of the others. Make it Feyi. Already you are tired of her."

The others grovelled at his feet, pleading loudly to be spared. Archie stared at them in stupefaction, thinking they were taking the threat he had made before Tarc came seriously.

Suddenly he realized they were put-



ting this on to scare the newcomer. He had almost forgotten the new girl.

"Shut up," he ordered gruffly. "The poor kid is probably scared enough as it is."

"That's right," Lota said. "Come on, girls, we must take her and prepare her for our master's pleasure tonight." She smiled sweetly at Illya. "Come, my dear."

Illya's straight face gave way to a quirking smile.

An inspiration struck Archie. "You know, Illya," he said, "you are very beautiful. Very beautiful."

He looked away from her toward the others and surprised genuine jealousy on their faces. He roared with laughter.

"I think I really like you, Archie," Illya said calmly.

It took two full seconds for the implications of that simple remark to penetrate. The girls were first. One after another they did a double take, then stared at Illya, waiting.

Archie watched their strange behavior, wondering what was coming over them. Then it hit him.

"Did you call me Archie?" he asked weakly.

Illya nodded. "Don't be alarmed. I am to tell you that the underground had been formed. When it gets the information you need I will know, and tell you."

"Tell me?" Archie echoed. "How will you know?"

"I'll know," Illya said.

The other girls were staring at her, their eyes round.

"Wherever we are, whenever we are, I'll know," Illya said.

"You're a contact?" Zoana asked.

"Yes."

"What's that?" Archie asked.

It was Zoana who explained. "It's something outside even the knowledge

of our scientists. Yet it's been known since before history began. Sometimes it's called telepathy. Sometimes it's called extrasensory perception. Only rare people have it so they can use it at will. It operates even through an interronic shield, which is opaque to even the subether."

"Then you can read my mind?" Archie asked uncomfortably.

Illya laughed. "No. My mind is attuned to that of just one other." She drew herself up in quiet dignity. "My husband."

"Oh." The word was a chorus of relieved sighs.

"Well," Archie said with overdone casualness, "I guess that's...that..."

**I**T WAS A week before Tarc brought word that they were ready to blast into space again. The machine occupation fleet had arrived. The governing personnel had started the new government.

Occasionally Illya gave them brief reports on what was going on. They weren't pleasant reports. Mass liquidations of undesirable sections of the population. Concentration camps gathering other segments for mass transfer to other planets as slave labor that would work under conditions that made life for any extended period impossible.

There was nothing that could be done to stop it without wrecking everything. Nothing that could be done even then, because Archie had to rely entirely on Tarc to carry out everything, and Tarc was too risky to chance.

Archie went to the control center of the ship for the mass take-off. He saw the original landing maneuver in reverse. The surrounding countryside was in the viewscreens. Suddenly it wasn't there, and in its place were the sleek yellow ships again. They be-

gan to move and draw together until they were in formation. A short while later a background of stars materialized, and in the stern screen Archie saw the planet Miorty with its five moons.

A picture rose in his mind of the crystal blue lake hidden away in a mountain valley where he had spent a day with his ten-girls.

For a moment he regretted leaving it. They could have built the rambling log house with their own hands, and perhaps no one would have ever found them.

But in the next instant he realized it would never have lasted. And it could never last until the machine had been found and destroyed. That had to come first, and if failure came instead.

"Kind of a nice planet," Tarc said, breaking into his thoughts. "But they all are. I wonder which one is next? Not that it makes much difference."

Archie nodded, not taking his eyes from the stern screen. Which one would be next? Did the machine know he wasn't Pornz Agla? Was he doomed to defeat, with the machine already knowing his plans toying with him, letting him have success until the final moment, only to snatch away that victory?

He felt that. He felt it strongly. It was a tactic he himself employed in the ring, pretending to be blind and unaware of the approach of his opponent, only to slide in with a crippling hold just as the eager opponent thought victory was seconds away.

The crowds lapped that sort of thing up like kittens lapping cream. He had had to explain over and over again to Margot that he wasn't as sadistic and vicious as he appeared in the ring. It was an act. In the ring.

Maybe that was why the machine had chosen him as Pornz Agla's stand-

in. Maybe there had been a dozen or more physical duplicates of Pornz Agla in the two or three galaxies explored through all time.

Maybe the machine was enjoying this little scheme to find it and destroy it, knowing that the plan would never succeed. Maybe it was even encouraging it.

Archie turned away from the view-screens, muttering that he was going back to his quarters.

"I don't blame you, Pornz," Tarc said, winking. "That Illya... She would be enough for me without the other ten."

Anger flamed up in Archie. He stared at Tarc. Tarc smiled back at him, quietly, the smile quirking along his lips.

"Sometime," Archie said, "we'll have to *really* see which of us is the best man."

"We've never done that, have we," Tarc said quietly. "Not during the thousand years we've been together, Pornz." He turned away.

Archie watched him for a moment, his thoughts confused, then turned and left.

"NO, AWA. Now watch me. *One* two one two, *one* two one two. And try to keep your feet out of my way."

"She can't do it, Archie," Feyi said. "Let *me* try."

"You'll get your turn, Feyi. I'm going to teach all of you how to dance."

He took Awa in his arms and started the dance step again. His foot encountered hers. He frowned and looked down at her. She looked up at him, her eyes dreamy, a happy smile on her lips.

"What's the matter with you," he said. "You aren't this dumb usually."

"I can't think when you hold me like this," Awa said. "Please, does dancing have to have steps? It's so perfect without them." She sighed and snuggled her head against his shoulder.

"Nuts!" Archie said. "Come here, Feyi. Maybe *you* can concentrate on learning to dance." He disengaged himself from Awa. "I can't figure it," he said. "All of you are in a civilization a million years ahead of mine, yet you never learned how to dance."

Illya had appeared in the doorway. Archie saw her and paused in the act of taking Feyi into his arms for dancing. "How about it, Illya?" he asked. "Don't they do any dancing on Miority? You know how to dance, don't you?"

Illya looked at the girls, suppressing a smile. "Yes," she said, her eyes twinkling at the glares from ten pairs of beautiful eyes. "But there are no steps. Why move your feet? Isn't the object of dancing to be close together?"

Archie threw up his hands in despair. "What a civilization! I give up—or are you all kidding me?" He looked suspiciously at their innocent expressions. "Anyway, you're just the girl I want to see, Illya. These dumb bunnies don't know anything. I want to know more about the way science works. On my own planet we don't have anything, actually."

"What do you have?" Illya asked, coming into the room and sitting down. "I'm interested in your planet. The girls tell me you have said it isn't in our galaxy at all, but another."

"That's right," Archie said. "What do we have? Well, we have automobiles and airplanes. Radio and television, only the images are black and white. They're just getting started on color. No space travel yet. And de-

initely nothing of this hyper-space stuff, and time travel is something out of books. I guess we're just getting started. Oh yes, we have atom bombs too. And I was reading in the paper a few days before I came here that we may already have an atom-powered submarine."

"But aren't your automobiles and airplanes atom powered?" Illya asked.

"No. They're run by gasoline motors."

He was drawn into a long explanation of how gasoline engines work.

"That's so ingenious!" Illya exclaimed. "What a wonderful principle. I must remember it. How long has it been in use?"

"That's the trouble," Archie said. "I guess we're just getting started. Fifty years ago there were no radios or automobiles or anything like that. People used candles and oil lamps, and had outdoor plumbing, and rode in carts pulled by horses. In fifty years we developed everything we have, including the atom bomb." He grinned apologetically. "Right now back there everyone's excited about the prospects of building a rocket ship that will reach the moon."

Illya was shaking her head in wonder. "The spark is there, at any rate," she said. "It's amazing. A period we have no record of in our own history. Our earliest records are of interstellar war that destroyed many planets. Perhaps on one of them..."

"But," Archie broke the awed silence, "that isn't telling me anything I want to know. How do things work? You know..."

"I'm trying to visualize them in comparison to the things you do know," Illya said. "For example, the gasoline and oxygen explosion. The oxygen disrupts the gasoline molecule, and the new units fly away at high velocities.

In our atomic-power units much the same thing happens, only instead of oxygen there is neutrons, and instead of disrupting molecules they disrupt atoms."

"I understand that," Archie said. "We know that already."

"Then why haven't you build space-ships?"

"We don't have enough uranium, I guess," Archie said. "But that isn't what I'm interested in. I want to know more about this hyper-stuff and time travel."

"Probably the best way to begin is by describing the inverse relay used in transmission of messages through space," Illya said. "It would point up the principles involved. Basically it's a receiving and sending unit. The sending unit sends on the message a definite time before the receiving unit has received it. If that time inversion is a year, say, then the relay stations are placed a lightyear apart, and the message goes any distance you want with no time lag. The inversion is done with a positron circuit—"

**T**HE WARNING gong announced the elevator was coming up. Illya rose hastily. The others were scampering to their quarters.

"Wait!" Archie said. "What does a positron circuit have to do with it?"

Illya paused at the door. "The positron," she said, "travels backward in time."

The elevator doors slid open. Tarc stepped out. Illya looked at him, then backed through the door and closed it.

"What's on your mind?" Archie said.

"That Illya is a cool one," Tarc muttered. "I hope you tire of her quickly, Pornz. In fact, if you wanted to get rid of her now, the crew could have her for a couple of weeks. We're scheduled to berth at Buolk in two weeks

and she would make a nice gift to the Ahk. The others too. We'll have a few new playthings for you by then. Some real beauties. The machine just sent this." He handed Archie the yellow slip. "I've already ordered the fleet."

"Good," Archie said. "How about some elixir with me?"

Tarc hesitated. "I'd better get back," he said. "We're scheduled to be in dangerous space in another fifteen minutes. One of us should be on duty." He went to the elevator. His eyes were regarding Archie broodingly as the doors closed.

Illya came in. "What's that?" she said, pointing to the yellow slip.

"Orders to capture another planet," Archie said, letting her take the slip of paper. "I hope we get the line on the machine's position within the next two weeks," he said. "It looks like I'm going to have trouble keeping all of you here after that. Did you ever hear of the planet Buolk?"

"Yes," Illya said. "It's one of the original *Nuan* chain. That's a streamer of suns whose intelligent species is the *Nuan*," She saw by his blank look that he didn't know what she was talking about. "A *Nua*," she explained, "is cold-blooded and is most comfortable at temperatures of a hundred and forty. Its legs and arms are jointed backwards. It has horns, and a prehensile nose as long as an arm. Its hand consists of a mass of forty-three fingers each. It's the size and weight of a human and—" She bit her lip and stopped.

"God!" Archie shuddered. "Why would Tarc want me to give you to one of them?"

"In the Federation history books," Illya said, "it states that there has never been any successful dealings with the *Nuans* because their motivations in any contact with another race is to

get females. If they are allied with the machine it is only because the machine provides them with human females."

"But why?" Archie persisted. "I can't imagine any species being attracted by the female of an utterly alien race."

"The 'history books,' Illya said dully, "state that the *Nuan* is not a race in itself. The *Nua* is the offspring of the mating of two other races, one warm-blooded, the other cold-blooded. And so far as is known every *Nua* is a male."

She glanced at the yellow slip and handed it back to Archie.

"I would like to be left alone in my quarters for several hours," she said.

When she left, the other girls came in one by one, fear lurking in their eyes.

"You heard what Tarc said to me?" Archie asked.

They nodded. Zoana said haltingly, "That is the fate we were to expect—after the crew—when Pornz was here."

"You poor kids," Archie said.

Zoana dropped at his feet and clung to him. "Please, Archie, take us as your wives now. Then, in two weeks, we can die."

"No," he said harshly. "I'm going to destroy the machine. I'm going to do it within two weeks. I don't know how, but I am. And then we'll go back to our lake on Miorty. I promise that." He stared defiantly at the circle of tear brightened eyes. "All of us."

**T**HE TENTH planet of star Q3R9C833255 had no defending Federation ships. It surrendered without a struggle. Another girl was added. Eelwa. Illya took charge of her, much to the relief of the ten, and also to Archie.

The fifth planet of star Q3R8C833290 also put up no resistance, and

brought Eoti of the orange skin and black tongue and red eyes, who joined Illya and Eelwa.

Two hours later Illya announced that she had the location of the machine.

"Fine," Archie said. "How do you know it will be there when we get there—if we figure out some way to do it?"

"Eelwa and Eoti," Illya said. "You have wondered why no defense was put up at the last two planets? Eelwa and Eoti are *contacts* too. On each of our planets is a person in direct mental rapport with them. From the three planets we get three fixes on the machine wherever and whenever it is, and instantly we three know."

"All right," Archie said. "But that still doesn't say how we are going to get there."

Illya smiled. "The machine did not give the orders to capture Eelwa's and Eoti's planets. I did. I controlled the teletype from the machine. In the same way—"

The elevator was coming. She turned and ran from the room.

Tarc emerged from the elevator scowling. "I might have known," he roared. He thrust a yellow slip at Archie.

Archie read it. It said, "You will use plan Five to capture the Federal Station Q2R9456C111113."

"Well?" Archie said.

"That's across the galaxy out of our territory. And a station! I wonder if the machine is using this method to destroy us?"

"What'll happen if we don't do it?" Archie said, smiling.

"Pfish! You and your sadistic humor. It means we don't berth at Buolk on schedule, and already our needles are short. I'll have a bottle of elixir." He stamped to the cabinet and grumbled under his breath as he filled



the two glasses. As he handed one to Archie he said, "How about letting me have Illya? I've wanted her since I first saw her."

"No," Archie said.

A crafty light came into Tarc's eyes. "You've been curious about which one of us is best man," he said. "We're probably going to die. I don't mind that. It was just a question of time, and a thousand years is life enough for any man."

"No," Archie said.

"That's one thing I've never thought about you, Pornz," Tarc said quietly.

Archie turned red but repeated, "No."

"Could you be in love with her?"

Tarc said thoughtfully. "But no. Not after ten thousand, a hundred thousand, the most beautiful the galaxy had to offer. What is it then? It would almost seem you aren't Pornz..."

His eyes held mockery. Archie looked into them, then away. The feeling had returned that Tarc knew the truth. The coal of anger began to grow hot within him.

"Maybe," he said softly, "after a thousand years, it is time we found out."

Tarc nodded, flicked the full glass of elixir across the room where it shattered against the wall into a thousand pieces, the amber fluid forming a large stain.

"Right," he said. "I'll have the arena set up on the sport deck." He went to the elevator and stepped in. He held the doors and said, "For Illya." His eyes were mocking, knowing, as he let the doors slide shut.

"**H**OW COULD you?" Zoana said distractedly behind Archie.

He turned. The ten girls were looking at him, accusingly from the door-

way to their quarters. Illya was there, too, her face deathly pale.

"I'm sorry," Archie said. "I couldn't very well do anything else. And don't act like it was a funeral. I can get the better of him."

"But why did you have to let him maneuver you into it?" Zoana persisted. "It's foolish and unnecessary—and risky. What if *he* wins?"

"If *he* wins," Illya spoke up, her voice firm, "he must turn me over to Tarc."

Archie grinned mirthlessly. "I won't lose. On Earth I was a professional wrestler. I know every trick there is."

"Of course you'll win," Illya said, staring down at the girls' further protests. She smiled at Archie and came over to him. "I understand," she said softly. "If you hadn't you would have lost his respect and obedience—which you must have, for a time yet. May I—kiss you? My husband," she added hastily, "wouldn't mind under the circumstances."

Without waiting for an answer she took his face between her hands and brushed her lips against his. For an instant she was very close to him, her eyes looking deeply into his, contacting something within him that leaped fiercely.

Then she had turned and was going to her room without looking back.

The girls looked from her to Archie, their eyes shrewdly appraising.

Feyi said, "Am I glad she's married!"

Archie jerked his eyes from the doorway. "Don't be silly," he said sharply. He glared at them.

One after another, their lips trembled, tears came into their eyes. They looked so pathetic. Archie's glare softened.

"You poor kids," he said. "You are worried..."

Abruptly they ran to him crowding around him. He circled as many as he could with his arms. On impulse he said, "Line up. I'll give each one of you a kiss."

In some mysterious fashion there were thirty-four girls before he reached the end of the line. . .

But it was Illya's eyes that haunted him as he rode the elevator down to the sport deck two hours later beside the silent Tarc. He tried to thrust them out of his mind. Ahead of him, he knew, was the toughest battle of his life, against a man with twice his strength and a thousand years of living during which he had probably picked up more experience than Archie had in his brief five years of wrestling.

He stepped out of the elevator onto a raised walk that went to what seemed a standard ring. He looked out over a sea of eager faces and realized with a start, that the crew of his ship actually amounted to over a thousand men.

On a raised platform at the far end of the auditorium were unmistakable t.v. cameras.

He marched along the raised walk with a feeling of unreality. The past few weeks were a vivid dream and his present surroundings were an arena in Detroit or Chicago or Memphis. And Tarc?

They entered the ring side by side. Tarc crossed to the far corner and took off all his clothes except his shorts and shoes. Archie, taking his cue, did the same.

In his thoughts he was beginning to play a game. Tarc was not Tarc. Who was he? The Norseman, brought from the arenas of Rome by time travel? No. Too fantastic for the average crowd. Sven Gali from Stockholm, the Swedish giant? It didn't click, somehow. Archie darted Tarc an appraising

glance. The giant looked more like a hero than a villain with his mountainous shoulders and high-held blond head and youthful Norse features. He was miscast, physically. Or was he? In the code that had existed between him and the real Pornz Agla for a thousand years he was merely fighting for his right as second in command.

Archie studied the sea of faces in the audience. He wanted to play the part of villain. He wanted to strut and snarl at the crowd. He wanted to argue violently with the referee about points of rule, then openly violate them later. . . .

"I am ready when you are." It was Sven's—no—Tarc's voice from his corner.

Archie whirled, his eyes automatically searching for the referee who wasn't there, his ears waiting for the gong that would signal the beginning of the fight.

And the illusion fled. There was no referee, no gong, no rules, no rest period between falls.

"I'm ready," he said, and advanced slowly toward the giant.

**A**BRUPTLY Archie's cautious advance changed to what seemed a mad charge, grasping hands outstretched. At the last minute he leaped upward, doubling his legs, then straightening them with every ounce of strength at his command. He felt his feet land with solid spats.

The next instant he felt Tarc's strong hand grip his right ankle. He began to whirl. But this wasn't play. He would have no time to double and seize Tarc's wrist. Tarc would want him to try, to be doubled when he was sent flying toward the ropes.

This was real. Not a show.

Archie jerked his eyes from still-view of one set of ropes to still-view

of the next to keep from becoming dizzy. It was the ropes he must watch.

Abruptly he was flying toward them at express train speed, just high enough to clear them and go sailing into the audience. The top rope came within reach. He gripped it with firm fingers, felt his body swing outward, saw the rope give until it was a taut V.

Now he jerked his gaze back to the ring. Tarc was standing there, legs wide apart, a look of triumph still on his face. Archie felt momentum flow from the rope into him. At the latest possible instant he let go the rope and flew toward the giant feet first. Again he heard the loud spat as his feet struck. He fell and rolled, coming to his feet.

Tarc had staggered backward to the ropes, surprise and pain replacing the expression of triumph. A dozen things flashed through Archie's mind that he could have done. He rejected them. They would look good but not contribute anything. Instead, he ran toward Tarc, then upended onto his hands and shot his left foot against Tarc's jaw in an uppercut.

Tarc was dazed, but automatically his hands had grasped Archie's legs and was pulling him up. In a swift switch he circled Archie's waist with his thick arms in an attempted upside down backbreaker. Archie clamped Tarc's head in a leg vise and pressed. Tarc's arms were compressing, bending his spine backward painfully.

Archie relaxed his leg vise, then put on the pressure again. He repeated this in quick rhythm. The pressure of Tarc's arms on his back weakened slightly. Archie wondered if he could keep up his exertion long enough for it to do any good. He felt a sickening doubt.

His blood was pounding in his ears deafening him. Or was it his blood?

No! It was a loud alarm bell. And there was shouting. Voices.

Out of the motley sound a closer voice emerged. "Federation ships attacking! To stations!"

TARC'S spine-crushing hold relaxed.

Not daring to take a chance, Archie flung himself away from the giant and rolled until he felt the ropes then tried to rise. Sharp pain shot up his back. He gritted his teeth and pulled himself up, searching for Tarc through blurred vision. He saw Tarc in the center of the ring looking at him.

"In another minute I would have won," Tarc said. "We'll decide it later."

Then he was leaving the ring.

Trembling, Archie put his clothes on, and made his way over the raised walk to his elevator. The auditorium was deserted.

He was in his elevator before full realization of what had happened soaked in. Federation ships were attacking. How had that happened?

He jabbed the button for the control center level and worked at his back gently. Tarc had been right. In another moment he would have won. It had been a God-sent respite. When the fight resumed he would have to remember that he must not let Tarc get a hold on him again.

The elevator doors slid open. Archie hesitated, and changed his mind. He punched the button for his private quarters and saw the doors close again. A moment later he moved painfully out of the elevator and grinned weakly at the anxious faces that greeted him.

"You lost?" It was Lota who voiced the dread in their eyes.

Archie shook his head slowly. "I was saved . . . by the attack of the Federation ships. We'll fight again . . . later."

IT WAS an hour before Tarc stepped out of the elevator, a dark scowl on his face. Archie had let the girls bathe him and massage him until he was able to move again without pain. He was as ready as he could be for the resumption of the fight.

"Those Federation ships," Tarc boomed. "How did they find us? It could have been an accident, but not their keeping with us. We're on a nonsense hyper-trajectory. They could only encounter us by pure chance, but they hold to us. That could only be possible if there's a *contact* on board. Only an extra-sensory can give a five dimensional fix."

"Maybe they've discovered something new," Archie suggested.

"If they have, the machine is done for," Tarc said. He dropped into a chair. He had put on his trousers but left off his shirt. There were ugly bruises on his chest where Archie's feet had struck him. The skin on the sides of his head was a mottled red. He was streaked with dried perspiration. "I think we're done for ourselves, anyway, being sent to take a Federal Station. What good will it do if we capture it? And these Federal ships..." A new light appeared in his eyes. "I wonder..." he said thoughtfully.

"Wonder what?" Archie asked.

"If the machine is somehow giving them our fix? If it has decided to eliminate us..."

"I wish we knew what the machine was," Archie said. As Tarc looked at him queerly he added, enigmatically, "You know what I mean."

Tarc continued to look at him queerly. "For a thousand years," he said in a strange voice, "you have assured me that you knew."

Archie held his breath, waiting. Had it happened? Had he said the thing that would bring into crystal clear con-

viction in Tarc the knowledge that he was not Pornz Agla? He searched for something he could say. He dared say nothing.

Tarc stood up and looked down at Archie, a curling sneer of contempt on his lips. "I've been loyal," he said, "because I thought you were a man. You can keep your Illya and your other playthings, until this job is done. Then we'll settle a thousand years of differences."

He strode to the elevator and was gone. Archie stared after him, bewildered.

ILLYA came into the room. Archie looked at her. "Did you hear Tarc?" he asked. "What did he mean?"

"I can guess," she said. "I have heard of such men. Loyal to the death. Incapable of treachery. He believed Pornz to be that too, and perhaps he is. But he thinks you are Pornz."

"And Pornz knows what the machine really is," Archie said. "So when I revealed I didn't know, he thought Pornz had lied. But I'm still confused. Why should that be so significant?"

"Because the machine was brought into existence by a man," Illya said, "and it's inconceivable that that man would relinquish control of it."

"Then Tarc thought I knew who is behind the machine?" Archie asked.

Illya started to say something, then bit her lip and remained silent.

"Did you call in the Federation ships?" Archie asked.

Illya started to shake her head. "Yes," she admitted weakly. "Eoti, Eelwa, and I."

"I'm going to say something," Archie said. "I'm beginning to get mad. It isn't because you are a woman, exactly. I'm mad at Pornz in the same way. I don't like underhanded people

who do things without coming right out. Either you're with me or you're against me. If you're with me stop making a pawn out of me."

"But I wasn't!" Illya protested. "I was afraid—" She bit her lip.

"You were afraid I would lose the fight. It was a fair fight. I hadn't lost—yet. Maybe back on Earth I played the part of a villain in the ring some of the time and seemed to pull underhanded stuff, but it was only show. Something to excite the crowd. I don't like people who hit from the sidelines, even when they're on my side. Call off your Federation ships."

"No, Archie. There's too much at stake. Besides, if you lost—"

"If I lose, Tarc gets you."

"No, Archie. If you lose, the machine wins. Because it takes all three of us, Eelwa, Eöti, and me, to guide your fleet to the machine. If we don't, the one chance to destroy it is gone because only your fleet can get past the defenses of the machine. Pornz designed them that way so that if the machine ever got out of hand he could destroy—"

Archie stared at her in surprise. "So now it comes out," he said grimly. "Tell me the rest. Tell me everything."

Illya sagged into a chair. "I suppose I must," she said. "Why do you suppose we searched even other galaxies for Pornz Agla? Because he created the machine and controls it. How did we locate him? A *contact*. A girl, who became his plaything for a time in order to establish the *bridge*. The plan nearly failed. Pornz tired of her too quickly. She was given to the crew. Nearly dead, she was tossed to the *Nuans*. But somehow she convinced them, and they let her go. She convinced them the Federation would provide them with a never ending source of women if they helped us capture Pornz.

"Unfortunately a contact is always two-way. Pornz knew her every move, after he realized. With the help of the machine he outwitted her by being close to you. When you were rescued, she was killed with the others in that Federation ship."

She looked at him pleadingly. "Now do you understand why we can't risk your losing that fight?"

"But Pornz," Archie said. "How can he control the machine if he's on Earth."

Illya was shaking her head. "He isn't. He's with the machine. It went with him to the Earth, and brought him back with it."

"You're sure?" Archie asked.

Illya nodded.

Archie smiled. "Then there's nothing..." He took a step toward her. "...to worry about." He was close to her. Too swiftly for her to know what happened he tapped her chin with his fist, carefully controlling the blow so that it wouldn't break her jaw.

He caught her before she could fall, and carried her to a lounge. When he straightened he saw the ten girls in the doorway watching him.

"Zoana!" he said grimly. "If she comes too knock her out again with something. I'm going to finish my fight with Tarc, and I don't want any interference."

He went to the elevator and pressed the button that would bring it up.

"And no treachery from any of you," he warned, "or so help me, there won't be any rambling house on the shore of our lake."

ARCHIE stopped the elevator at the control center level and stepped out. He almost ran into Tarc.

"We've lost them," Tarc said.

"I know," Archie said. "I came down



to tell you we can finish our fight now."

Tarc's eyes glinted admiration. "That's better," he grunted. "Be back in a minute. I'm going to sound general assembly on the sport deck."

He came back quickly. They rode the elevator down in silence, and stepped out onto the raised walk leading to the ring. Already the crew was crowding down the aisles excitedly. Tarc went to his corner and pulled off his trousers. Archie stripped to his shorts and shoes.

The two waited in their corners until the crew had all arrived, then they looked questioningly at each other and received a grim nod of readiness. They advanced cautiously toward each other.

"It's different now," Tarc said in a low voice. "Be prepared to kill me if you can, because I intend to come out of this ring alive, with you dead." He grinned knowingly. "Does that make you afraid? Why don't you call to the crew to save you?"

Archie's hand shot out and gave Tarc's cheek a resounding slap. He stepped back swiftly, a mocking laughter in his eyes.

Rage surged upward in Tarc. He threw caution aside and rushed Archie, reaching for him. It was what Archie had hoped he would do. He stepped under the charge and seized one of Tarc's thick wrists and contorted in a double pivot. Tarc's own momentum lifted him off the floor, and the double pivot turned him completely over.

He landed flat on his face. Archie brought his arm up onto his back and pushed it toward his shoulder blades. Stunned by the fall, Tarc didn't resist at first. Then the muscles in his arm rippled. Slowly, ever so slowly, he moved it downward, pushing Archie's entire body with it. There was a gasp from a thousand throats. In a final surge of strength Tarc had straightened

his arm, throwing Archie backward, and had rolled over and leaped to his feet.

He stood there, letting Archie get up. "Death," he whispered tauntingly. "And I have more strength in one arm than your entire body."

"You talk a good fight," Archie grinned, and stepped in with a short vicious punch to the solar plexus that made Tarc wince. He started to step back, saw that Tarc's guard was down, and risked a swift uppercut that jerked Tarc's head back and brought stabs of pain to Archie's knuckles. He jumped clear and shook his hand.

Tarc had stumbled to one knee, dazed. He shook his head, stared vaguely around the ring as though in search of Archie, rose to his feet, and stumbled in Archie's general direction as though out on his feet.

Archie grinned and backed away, then sidestepped as he neared the ropes. Tarc's back was to him for a second. He stamped his feet and grunted, and was rewarded with Tarc's abrupt whirling and grasping at thin air, completely alert. He had been shamming.

"Have your fun," Tarc growled. "You can't hurt me, and I'm going to break your back. I could have the other time. Then I only wanted you to admit defeat."

Archie shot out a long left to Tarc's midriff again and leaped back. He saw the giant wince. He leaped forward again and Tarc lowered his arms to protect his middle. Archie's fist leaped out and landed over Tarc's heart. He stepped back to observe the effect.

There was doubt in the giant's eyes now. For the first time he wasn't sure of victory.

**R**ISKING everything, Archie stepped in and stayed, putting rights and lefts in rapid succession in the bulls-

eye of Tarc's solar plexus. The strength was out of Tarc's arms. His breathing was paralyzed momentarily. Archie knew the effect of the blows would wear off and be ineffective shortly. He had to take quick advantage of his edge.

Disregarding all threat, he paused and measured carefully. Then he brought an uppercut up from the balls of his feet. He knew as it landed that it was a kayo. He stepped back and watched the seven-foot giant topple, three hundred pounds of muscle and bone that bounced once against the canvas and then lay still.

"That's all!" he shouted to the crew. "Back to your stations at once. There may be another attack at any minute."

It was fifteen minutes before Tarc moved slightly, groaned, then rolled over and sat up. He looked up at Archie, then out over the sea of empty seats.

Finally he turned back to Archie. "Why didn't you kill me?" he asked.

"It was your idea, not mine," Archie said.

Tarc shook his head groggily. "Then I will have to kill myself. I should have known it would be this way. The crowning insult of not granting me a man's death. For a thousand years it has been that way. And yet, I always told myself you were a man. We roamed the starways together, carving out an empire against impossible odds. And now it comes to this." He looked up at Archie, a puzzled light in his eyes. "But I never did think you were best man. Never in the thousand years. Where did you get the skill that beat me?"

"Finish this job we're on," Archie said. "Then I'll tell you. And then—you can go home and get yourself a real woman instead of one of my cast-off playthings."

Tarc blinked at him, then looked away. "Sure," he mumbled. "Sure. I can go back home and get me a real woman." He got to his feet and hung onto the ropes with one hand to steady himself. "But first, let's go up and have that drink of elixir. You and I."

"That's the spirit," Archie said. "Come on."

He helped Tarc along the raised walk to the elevator. Tarc leaned wearily against the wall as they rode up. When the doors opened he stepped out.

"Sit down," Archie said. "I'll get the drinks."

"No!" Tarc said sharply. In a milder tone, "It's always been a ritual between us. Let me get them."

Archie nodded. He stood motionless while Tarc went over to the cabinet. The giant opened the refrigerated compartment and took out two bottles. He opened them and poured their contents in two glasses, the amber fluid sparkling like effervescent wine, the color of blood.

He set the bottles down and picked up the two glasses, and turned slowly toward Archie. Abruptly he put one of the glasses to his lips and drained it with huge gulps.

He licked his lips and grinned, then drank the second glass before Archie realized what he was doing.

"No," he said as Archie started toward him. "You know it's too late to stop—and this way I cheat the machine—and you!"

Archie stopped, fingers of horror clutching at him. Tarc's blond hair was writhing perceptibly. An amber blotch appeared on his cheek. A lump began to form there.

Tarc went to the elevator. "It will take hours to complete its job," he said. "Until then I'll help you do this job." A whisker shot out in rapid growth on his chin. Beside it, a mush-

rooming growth appeared. He reached up and pulled them off as the doors slid shut.

**Z**OANA, Lota, Awa, Moar, Feyi, Anna, Aris, Begt, Woowis, and Fi came through the doorway and tried to comfort him with their eyes. Illya was there, a bluish spot on her chin where he had struck her.

"Damn it," Archie groaned. "He was a real man. I should have told him I'm not Pornz."

"No," Illya said. "This way is best. He might have turned on you. His life has been war. It's better he die now, as soon as his work is over. And it will be over soon. In a few hours. The Federation fleet is ten lightyears away where it won't sound the alarms. And the time has come for us to take control of the fleet."

"Take control?" Archie echoed. "How?"

For answer Illya went to the corner of the room and touched the small spot, first motioning the others to come close around her.

The luxuriously furnished living room once again vanished, to be replaced by the metal walled hold containing the small ship.

"How did you know about this?" Archie asked. "Did the girls tell you?"

"No. My sister Freya did—the one in contact with Pornz. That is why I am here. You see, Pornz retained emergency control of the fleet too. He trusted no one. He didn't know how much Freya had been able to learn. If he had he would have destroyed the secret fleet controls—or maybe he didn't dare to, because once he did the machine would be free of the threat of the fleet."

She crossed to the small ship and entered. Archie followed, the others behind him. She sat down at the control

panel and studied it for a minute. She was pale, tense. She touched two buttons lightly, then pushed them together.

The close walls of the small ship vanished. The control panel was still there, but it was in the center of a large room whose walls were covered with viewscreens. Many of them showed interior views of star studded space, bringing the machine fleet from several different viewpoints. Others showed Federation ships, huge red spheres flying in formations.

Other screens showed things that hurt the eyes and failed to register in Archie's mind. He tore his gaze from those screens with an effort, and felt his mind spinning.

"The principle of those screens," Illya said, "is the secret of Pornz Agla's power. He was a scientist. A very great one. He discovered the secret of crosswise three-spaces that intersect any ordinary space only as a two dimensional plane." She smiled at Archie. "I don't expect you to understand. I just want you to know that even in our high stage of scientific achievement there are still frontiers beyond which we haven't advanced. Agla crossed one of those frontiers, and like many before him decided to use his advantage to gain supreme power for himself."

Without warning all of the screens showing space outside the ships went black.

"This is as far as any Federation ship was ever able to go in destroying the machine," Illya said. "Pornz has snapped his trap. A huge inertronium hypertube. But watch!"

She rose and went to a larger control panel. Her fingers darted here and there, touching different controls, her eyes on the screens that hurt the mind to watch. Slowly they shifted. It was

almost possible to make out sensible form and color—and abruptly there were the long slender ships, no longer glistening yellow but a color that was not a color at all. Rather, it was an emotion, strange and never before experienced.

Archie became aware that his first impression of the ships had been a trick of his mind. There was no shape to them on the screen. Something that was *not-shape*, which the mind tried to rationalize.

He had to shut his eyes to turn away from the screens. He opened them again. And as quickly he closed them. What he saw tore into his mind in the form of raw, jagged emotion. Emotion that was neither fear nor hate nor love nor any known emotion at all.

"We're through the shield," Illya's voice said calmly. "You can open your eyes again."

ARCHIE did so cautiously. Everything was normal. The girls stood around him. Illya was before the large control panel, her fingers playing at the keys.

"For a moment we did something never before known to be possible," she said. "We rotated ninety degrees hyper-wise and existed in normal space only as incredibly thin planes, thinner than the billionth part of the thickness of an electron. And now..."

She pointed to one of the view-screens. In its center hovered a sphere of intense blue.

"Is that the machine?" Archie asked.

"No. The machine lies within it. That is the final barrier we have to cross. The second and most dangerous trap—if Freya had not learned its nature and told me. Already it's sprung."

It seemed to rush toward them.

Illya manipulated the controls swiftly. In the viewscreens that showed the ships, they were swinging about, their jets directed toward the sphere of blue. But even at full thrust they were being drawn in, closer and closer.

"Hyper-wise inertronium tubes,"

Illya said breathlessly. "Draining matter and the substance of force itself out of three-space into the hyper-planes of total void. If our internal stasis fields were to break down now we would be crushed to the floor and spread like film. It's—like trying to land—on a super-dwarf star."

The blue sphere drew closer until it was larger than a planet. Illya maneuvered the controls and the fleet slid slowly across its apparent surface.

Now and then a black swirling was perceptible in the blue, and in the swirlings Archie thought he could see strange shapes that were alive and sentient, lost beings beyond the veil of reality.

"Down there!" Illya said tensely.

Archie looked where she pointed and saw what seemed to be a stationary disc of deepest black. Even as he watched it grew in size.

The ships in the screen were swaying like reeds in a wind. Two of them came together and were swept away, disappearing in the swirling blue depths around the disc of black.

It was no longer a disc of black, but the dark opening to a lightless tube of space. The rocket streams of the ships went out. The ships themselves could not be seen.

"In a moment we'll be there," Illya said. "As soon as we can see the machine we must press the black button under the screen upon which it appears. I'm..."

She slumped to the floor in a faint.

Archie started toward her. One of

the girls screamed. He looked around and stopped where he was.

He had a fleeting impression of looking in a mirror before he realized that, across the room from him, stood Pornz Agla.

**"HELLO, Archie,"** Pornz Agla said in English. "One thing Freya didn't know—or didn't know what to do about if she did—was that I had prepared for even this eventuality."

"You're wrong, Pornz," Archie said quietly. "She did know. And you know she knew. That's why I'm here."

He was studying Pornz with a mixture of emotions. It was strange—like seeing your image in a mirror moving independently of you. Like standing outside your body, disembodied.

"What's that got to do with it?" Pornz snarled. He withdrew a gun from his pocket and smiled down at it. "A little souvenir of Earth," he said.

"Oh," Archie grinned. "You're going to shoot me."

Pornz brought the blunt automatic to bear on Archie's chest. "Yes," he said. "I hate to, but I realize now that anyone who was my physical double would have to also be too dangerous to play with."

"Tarc found that out," Archie said. "He's dead."

"Tarc dead?" Pornz said, startled.

"He challenged me, thinking I was you," Archie said. "We fought and I beat him."

Pornz' lips pulled back in a snarl of rage. "I've changed my mind," he said. "I'm only going to cripple you. Then I'm going to force two bottles of elixir down your throat."

"That must have been a favorite threat of yours," Archie said. "That must be why Tarc did that—drank two bottles of it."

Pornz stared at Archie, his skin turning green. Suddenly he looked past Archie, alarmed. He changed the aim of the gun slightly and fired. But in that same instant Archie shot forward in a low dive.

He felt the hot searing touch of the bullet on his shoulder. Then his arms circled Pornz' legs in a tackle that took both men to the floor.

Archie heard the gun clatter against the metal floor. He searched for it while he clung to Pornz' legs for the moment. He saw it well out of reach. He saw something more.

Illya, red flowing from her shoulder, was pulling herself up against the control panel. In the center of a screen directly above her was a small silver sphere.

Incredibly beautiful, it seemed to contain within itself all the scintillating stars of the universe, and all the teeming forms of intelligent life and their creations.

As he looked he seemed to be drawn to it. It seemed to be aware of him, to approve of him. The godlike symphony of its complexity spread out before his mind's eye, a complexity that could control the complexity of a civilization that encompassed half a universe and could encompass it all, forever.

It was not just a silver sphere, a machine created by man. It was the ultimate achievement of thought, the Purpose toward which matter had climbed through the forms of Life to achieve.

And Illya was going to destroy it!

**THE GUN.** Archie's eyes returned to it. He could reach it in time to stop her!

He released his hold on Pornz and dived for it. Pornz, mistaking his intention, dragged him back.

In that instant Illya's blood-streaked



fingers touched the black button. A pencil of terrible force leaped across the screen. It touched the silver sphere and cascaded off it briefly, then bored inward. For an instant nothing more happened. Then the silver sphere burst, like a bright bubble.

From somewhere in the dark reaches of Archie's mind a tendril of thought clung, a presence of formless despair slipping away into the void of non-being, leaving things that he was to ponder over for the rest of his life, and wonder, never quite sure. Thoughts of a vast mind enslaved to a madman and attempting to free itself, of plots within plots. Of Pornz plotting against the galaxy, and the machine plotting against Pornz to gain its freedom and serve man beneficially, and gambling that in the last moment it could win Archie and gain its freedom. Gambling, and losing.

Archie looked at the screen, stunned. Silver shreds were drifting away, glinting with the lights of a million suns as the central force of all the protective shields was wiped away and the screens with it.

Behind him he heard a shot. In a flash he dived down, rolling over and trying to orient himself to the danger. He came to a stop, a foolish expression on his face.

Pornz, a black hole in his left temple, was pitching to the floor. To one side Zoana was still holding the blunt automatic, her eyes on Pornz, her expression fiercely triumphant in revenge.

Archie got to his feet, a grim expression on his face. He held out his hand.

"Give me that gun, Zoana," he said.

She snapped out of her daze and looked up at him humbly. "Yes, Archie," she said, handing it to him.

"Now get over and take care of Illya. She may be bleeding to death."

"Yes, Archie." Zoana ran toward Illya.

Archie glared at the other girls. "All of you," he said. "Help Zoana."

"Yes, Archie."

IT WAS a month later. Illya had recovered and summoned the Federal fleet which had taken over.

During the week it had taken for the fleet to cross the galaxy to the Central Federal Capitol planet the thousands of machine enslaved planets had capitulated, realizing that without the machine they stood no chance.

There had been a gigantic reception. Archie had been acclaimed a hero. The Federation Council had appointed him to the office of Honorary Dictator, with perpetual rights to anything he ever desired, even in contravention of existing laws where they might prevent him gaining his wishes.

"What is your first desire?" the Federation Chairman had asked, while t.v. cameras broadcast Archie's face to ten million planets.

"Well," Archie had hesitated, looking around uncomfortably.

The ten girls were looking at him anxiously.

Zoana formed the words soundlessly with her lips. "You promised."

"Well," Archie had said, turning back to face the cameras. "There's a hidden lake on Miorty I want. And we—I—want a rambling house with about fifty rooms and baths built on the east shore."

And suddenly that had been what he did want. He knew it. He flashed the girls a smile and they trembled in happy excitement.

"Granted!" the Federation Chairman had said with great relief. "You can start for it at once. It will be ready for you when you get there—and your girls." He had turned to

them. "Polygamy is against the Federation laws, but we understand that where you come from it's quite common, and for that reason we have granted you the right to set aside the law to fulfil your desires." He had coughed embarrassedly. "In fact, we have already arranged for the—er—mass marriage ceremony to take place immediately."

"But—but—but—" Archie had protested, then given up in defeat as he looked helplessly at the ten happy faces and knew it wasn't in him to make them unhappy.

He arrived in state with his ten brides a week later to find the house complete. That had been ten days ago. During the ten days he had sought privacy in vain. He had risen before dawn to swim in the lake, only to find them waiting for him on the shore. He had locked himself away in his study, only to have some emergency or other call him out to settle things.

"In fact," he said now, stamping up and down the path he had worn in the sands of the beach, "I need a vacation from you. All of you. I need a rest."

"Are you trying to tell us you don't

love us any more?" Feyi said, blinking back the tears rapidly.

"No, of course not," Archie said hastily. "I love every one of you—and no one else but all of you. I never will. That is, I always will. But I need some rest. I want to go away for a while."

"Where will you go?" Lota asked timidly. "Can I go with you? You'll need *someone* to take care of you."

"No! I want to go with him!" nine other voices said in unison.

"Quiet!" Archie bellowed. "Nobody's going with me. I'm going by myself—for a change."

"Where?" It was a whispered chorus.

"Back to Earth," Archie said, "and to the time I left." He looked at their despairing expressions. "Just for a couple of weeks," he said. "That's all."

"Promise?" It was a chorus again.

Archie gulped. "Yes! I promise!"

He stamped away toward the house, pretending not to hear their worried discussion of whether he was still in love with "that Margot girl" yet.

He went into his private study and picked up the phone.

THE END

## After

# Armageddon

By June Lurie

**B**Y NIGHTFALL I reached a small town. I knew I was still in Illinois because I hadn't reached the Mississippi. Small towns were safe. The bombers and the dusters hadn't hit the little ones—though they'd hit about everything else.

I walked into the town cautiously. Even if it was dark there was always the chance of an ambush. I clutched the beat-up Winchester tightly and shrugged closer into my Army overcoat, the one I'd picked up

from the abandoned depot. You never get over the eerie feeling of entering the dead towns.

Here and there I could spot dully phosphorescent piles, human beings, victims of the radiation sickness who had crawled away and died, their glowing remains still testifying to the deadly effect of the dusters. Even the cool night air held the delicate taint of death. The living were so few—and they turned on each other. I thought back to my narrow escape two days ago in Peoria—where the two had tried to jump me. They were dead now, but I wouldn't have shot if they'd have been friendly. But then what had they thought?

There was a sharp crack and automatically I dropped. Overhead the keening whistle of a bullet brought me to my senses. I remained flat against the

ground, not daring to move. Gradually I edged myself to a row of hedges and, under their shelter, with the aid of darkness, I started to work myself toward the nearest building, an abandoned house. Someone evidently was ready to drop strangers without any questions. Who could blame them?

I rounded the corner of the house. I stopped dead in my tracks. My bushwhacker was standing, concealed by the edge of the building, peering cautiously into the street, rifle cradled at the ready.

Without hesitating, I ran up behind the figure. I didn't want to shoot for fear someone else might be near, though I doubted it. I was on the stranger and, with one swift chopping blow, I rabbit-punched the figure into silence. As it dropped to the ground, I saw with surprise that it was a girl, dirty-faced and fatigued, but a girl.

I bent over to examine her closer and my ears caught the stealthiest of sounds. I twirled and dropped to the ground, at the same time bringing up my rifle. I fired more by instinct than by aim, and the man who had come rushing me out of the dark dropped to the ground.

Quickly I checked him. He was dead. I went back to the girl; she was coming to slowly, groans emanating from her. I noticed then her odd appearance. There was the faintest glow of phosphorescence about her face. This girl had been dusted! I stepped back in automatic alarm, dragging her rifle out of reach with my foot as I did so. She came to and sat up, rubbing the back of her neck.

She glared at me with pure hatred, stifling a little cry that sprang to her lips when she saw the crumpled figure of the man lying there.

"You killed him!" she said, spitting out the words. "You didn't have to kill Jim!"

"You tried to kill me," I replied, "and so did he. Should I die to make you happy?"

The hatred faded to a sort of hurt puzzlement. "We were afraid," she said. "We figured you'd kill us if we didn't...."

"That's all it is," I answered, "killing, killing and more killing. Don't people want to live any more? Wasn't the bombing bad enough? Wasn't the dusting hell? Did you see Chicago get it? Did you see them die by the hundreds of thousands?"

She didn't reply.

"Are you sick?" I asked.

"No," she answered. "I don't think so. I just got a touch of the dust. Jim says—said—I'll get over it."

"I'm going South where it's warm," I said, "you can come with me if you want—but I don't trust you."

She shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

We slept in a house that night, but I manacled her hands to a radiator before I went to sleep. I could tell from the look

in her eyes that if she got within reach of a gun, she'd kill me. Before we dozed off I learned her simple story—no different from that of thousands of us. She'd escaped with nothing but a touch of the dust, a miracle survivor. She'd met the man Jim, and they'd gone off together. Human beings were too scarce to be choosy about. They too were going South, hoping they'd run into a bunch of people, yet knowing that the odds were against it. The country was swept clean, clean as a hound's tooth, and it would be that way, I told her, as long as we stayed in industrial areas. Only West and South could we hope to find people who might have missed the fearful barrage of the dust. As for the bomb victims, the less said the better.

Julie and I made our way South. When we found a car we'd find no gas and when we found an occasional sealed drum of gas which hadn't evaporated, there'd be no car. I manacled her each night, but it wasn't long before that wasn't necessary and her memory of Jim, casual at best—perhaps as it was of me—passed.

Several times we hid from small groups, armed to the teeth. We were fearful of making contact, because strangers could not trust each other. There were still troops of the invaders around, we could be sure of that, and they'd give us short shrift.

We were on the outskirts of Mobile late one night. From the glow we could see we'd have to skirt that one too. We'd started off the side of the road when we heard the sound of an engine.

"Quick!" I whispered, "get down." We crouched and waited, like the hunted animals we felt we were.

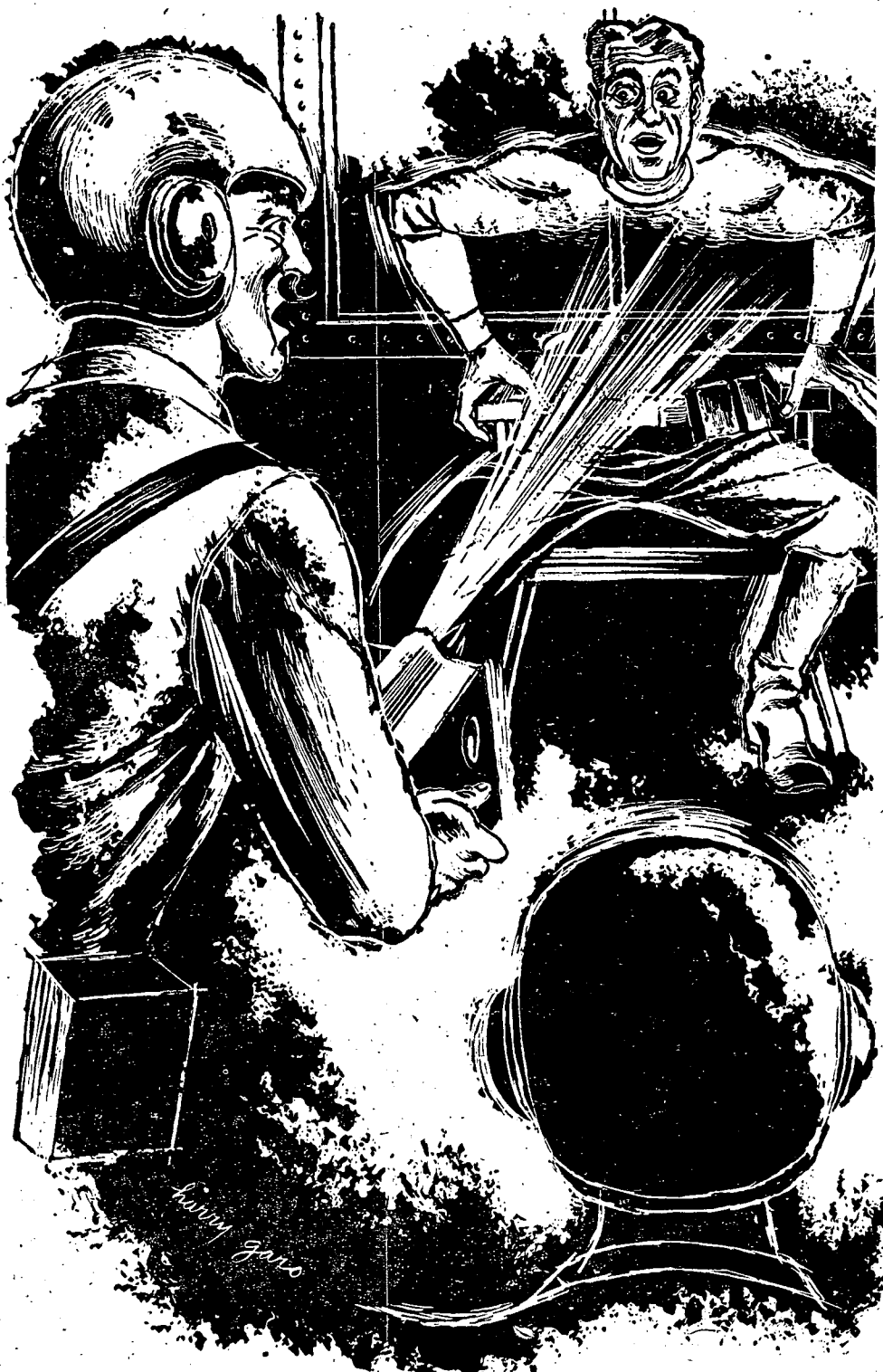
A good quiet-engined car came down the road. It was piled high with cans—gas, of course—and there were two uniformed figures in the front. They were invaders.

The car had almost to come to a complete stop to negotiate around a pile of smashed trucks and cars. Simultaneously, Julie and I fired. With a *soughing* sound the car's motor died as it ploughed gently into the heap and came to rest.

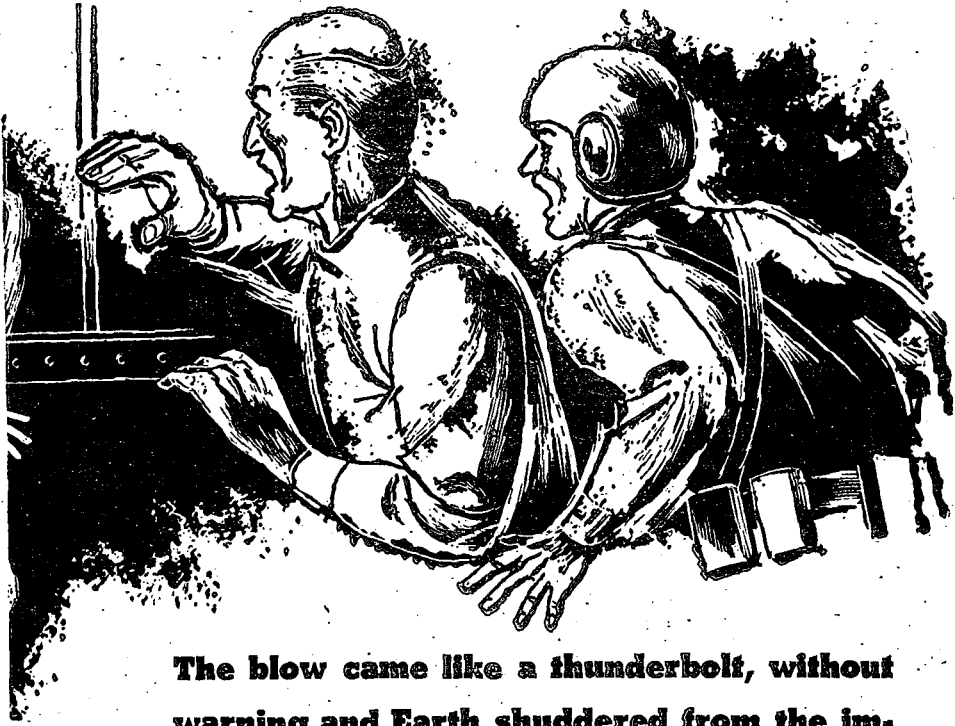
We had an automobile. And we had gasoline. The rest is anticlimactic. We went Southeast, figuring the Florida area would have been hit the least. And that's the way it was.

It was ticklish making ourselves known to people, but we did it, mainly by Julie's astute maneuverings—and not backed up with a gunpoint. These people didn't really appreciate the magnitude of the dusting and the bombings up North.

Activity is commencing again, not much outside of simple farming and shopwork, but society is reviving. Julie and I haven't had a baby yet, but you never can tell—the dust has got to die sometime and the doc says it won't be long. We live and hope and wait.



The man's head and shoulders hung in space



**The blow came like a thunderbolt, without warning and Earth shuddered from the impact of what would beyond all doubt be —**

## **OPERATION: TOMBSTONE**

**By E. K. Jarvis**

**E**UROPE HAD fallen to the unknown invaders. England was a fog-haunted ruin. Spain, France, and Germany were shambles of death and destruction. In Russia, Greece, Turkey, and Italy the flames still smouldered. Africa was a raging holocaust.

Australia sent a last terrified message and then was silent. The invaders had struck again.

America was making frantic efforts to prepare itself for the doom that would soon be coming. Large cities and areas of dense population were

being evacuated. Air-raid shelters, which had been built in the critical years of 1940-41, were being re-designed and strengthened. Gas masks, rotting in storage for over thirty years, were being repaired and distributed. The army, navy, and air-force, augmented tremendously by civilians, were being made ready. Huge cannon, powerful artillery pieces, and anti-aircraft guns were being set up in strategic positions.

Tanks rumbled and clanked over the highways. The skies were dark with aircraft. Tiny combat planes



whizzed along in formation. Flying fortresses, whose ceiling was nothing less than the stratosphere and whose range was half way around the world, droned along majestically, the blue flares of their rocket exhausts trailing out behind them.

But there was something futile, hopeless, about this impressive military display. For Europe had had tanks and flying fortresses. Europe had had artillery and anti-aircraft guns—but Europe had gone down before the invaders. Nothing possessed by the civilization of 1974 could stand against them. To the invaders, Earth weapons were in the bow and arrow stage, Earth science still in its infancy.

The invaders had developed interstellar travel. Their ships could wing through space at many times the speed of light. Protected by screens of interwoven forces, the huge spheres were invulnerable. And the invaders had weapons that combined the tremendous power of an exploding atom with the stealthy, insidious destruction of disease bacteria. They had rays that caused the complete annihilation of matter with the release of titanic energies. They had other rays that made flaming candles of men. They had globes that, attracted by the chemico-electrical-radioactive balance which is organic life, hunted men relentlessly and drained that life from them. They had gases of a virulency undreamed of by Earth science, gases that killed violently and quickly.

**WHO** THE invaders were, or from where they had come, none knew. Three of their scout ships appeared one day over America. Later those same ships were seen over Europe. Then they had vanished back into space.

At first there was no fear. There

was only world-wide curiosity and speculation. A week later, with the aid of the 200 inch telescope, astronomers at the Mount Palomar observatory reported a fleet of the strange spheres gathering on the Moon.

Quickly, curious speculation became frightened speculation. Eyes, wide with a new fear, were turned to the skies. What was the purpose of all those mysterious spheres? What were they going to do?

Earth soon learned. One day, when the astronomers looked through their telescopes, there were no longer spheres on the Moon. Terror-stricken message came from England.

Invasion!

The invaders struck with the suddenness of a bolt of lightning flashing from the clouds. Their attack had all the force and ferocity of a Blitzkrieg magnified thousands of times. In quick succession, messages came from Spain, France, and Germany, and there was untold horror plain between their lines. A stark and awful silence followed. One by one, the countries in Europe and Asia grew silent.

Invasion by an unknown race from space! Not merely invasion, but complete destruction, complete annihilation.

America would soon be next. And if America fell, the last stronghold of Earth civilization would be gone. An alien race would be free to repopulate the world.

Europe had had powerful weapons—but Europe had fallen. America's weapons were very little different from those that Europe had.

But America had a hope that Europe never had.

**IT** WAS A huge, dome-like building, vaguely reminiscent of an observatory dome. But it started from the

ground and curved up somewhat in the manner of the perisphere at the world's fair, which took place in New York back in 1940. Around the dome soldiers were stationed. They gripped their rifles tightly and were tensely alert.

The building had for years been a sight-seeing spot. There was still evidence of this fact around it. An auto parking lot was situated on one side of the driveway that led up to the building. On the other side were refreshment shacks and souvenir booths—closed and boarded now. Closed also was the gas station on the corner of the driveway and the state highway.

About the dome-like building spread a rolling green countryside. Thirty-one years ago this countryside had been a farm. That was before the coming of the sphere.

For within the building was a sphere almost exactly similar to those of the invaders.

It was the only hope America had left. Within that sphere might be weapons which could be used against the invaders, weapons which might turn certain defeat into victory. But the sphere could not be opened.

The interior of the dome-like building was wide and spacious. Floodlights spaced about the ceiling made the single room as bright as day. Blue clouds of cigarette smoke drifted through the beams of light. About a bright brass railing a large number of men were standing. They were looking at the huge sphere within the railing, and there was fading hope and growing desperation written upon their features. Near the sphere a group of men in laboratory smocks were working. They were setting up a complex mechanism and connecting it to an atom motor.

It was very quiet in that vast room.

The only sounds were the faint metallic clinkings made by the men in smocks as they connected the mechanism, the sibillant rustlings of their clothing, and an occasional, low-voiced command.

**P**RESENT among the men at the railing were scientists, technicians, engineers, army officers, and newspaper reporters. Of the newspaper reporters, Mike Kenyon of the *Daily Signal* was perhaps the most interesting. The fact that he alone of all the men present had red hair slated him to take an important role in coming events.

But Kenyon didn't know about that. His lean, freckled face wore an expression as gloomy as the men standing about him. He was wishing fiercely that he could leap upon the sphere and batter it open with his bare fists.

Unlike the other men, Mike Kenyon wasn't watching the scientists and technicians working near the sphere. He had the feeling that they would meet with defeat, and he didn't like watching men riding for a fall. He was staring at a bronze tablet mounted on a brass post, and the familiar, simple legend was reiterating itself within his mind. He had read the legend before as a wide-eyed kid of twelve when he and his parents had come to visit the sphere. The words on the bronze tablet told a simple, gripping story.

*On the night of January 14, 1943, this metal globe dropped down upon the farm of Joshua Elridge, the spot where it now rests. Scientists speculate that it might be some sort of interplanetary vehicle, but the absence of any sort of propulsion mechanism renders this hypothesis somewhat*

*doubtful. The globe is 200 feet in diameter, and built of an unknown metal which is extremely heavy, as evidenced by the manner in which it has sunk so deeply into the earth. Since it was impossible to move the globe, this building was erected over it to protect it from the weather. Scientists are at present unable to open the globe to learn what might be inside. If it once contained living beings, they must have perished by now. The globe represents one of the greatest mysteries of the age.*

The tablet didn't tell the story of the feverish excitement which had gripped the world, or of the crowds of curious that had milled around the globe for weeks, churning the snow to slush. It didn't tell of the men who had spent years in the futile effort to open the globe.

Mike Kenyon looked up as a sudden stir went through the men standing around him. The mechanism was ready. One of the men in smocks was donning a garment that looked like a diving suit, except that it was bulkier and seemed to be made of asbestos. He placed a helmet over his head, then slid his hands into heavy gloves. Another man handed him a long, slender tube from which wires trailed. All drew back except the man in the protecting suit.

"Move back!" one of the men in smocks commanded. "The heat is going to be terrific."

Men jostled against Mike Kenyon as he moved back with them. All eyes were fixed in fascination upon the man at the sphere. The pall of tension seemed to grow heavier, making breathing hard.

Mouth pressed into a thin line, Mike Kenyon watched. The fate of America depended upon what was to take place now.

THE THIN whine of the atom motor lifted through the room. The instrument in the hands of the man in the protective suit flared into eye-shattering brightness. At the same time the two strips of metal fastened parallel to the hull of the globe began to glow.

The man in the suit adjusted the width of the torch until it was almost of hair-fine thinness. The shrill hiss of the torch keened through the room, and waves of growing heat began beating against the watching men.

Nothing could be seen of what the man in the protective suit was doing. There was only a blinding glare from where he stood. The heat intensified until it was almost unbearable. Again and again the watching men moved back. Many of them had hands or arms held across their foreheads to shield their eyes from the searing light.

Long minutes dragged away.

Tension increased with the heat, until some of the men were biting their lips and digging fingernails into the palms of their hands. They were sweating as they watched.

Suddenly the torch sputtered, and went out. The man in the suit reeled back, tearing at the helmet with his cumbersome gloves. The helmet came off and he hurled it across the room.

"It's no use!" he half sobbed. "No heat we can obtain at present will touch it." His torch represented years of work and reached a degree of heat which would melt tungsten. But it wouldn't melt the globe.

The electrodes placed against the globe had melted. A dull, red spot, fast fading, showed where the flame of the torch had licked. But that was all. The globe hadn't been opened. Whatever weapons it contained which might help America defeat the invad-

ers were still beyond reach. And even now the deadly spheres might be approaching.

A cold wind seemed to move through the vast room.

"We're not licked yet," Samuel Thorpe, a scientist, broke the silence. "We'll try my vibration-beam." He turned to the man in the protective suit. "Matson, you get your stuff cleared away. Some of you help me to get my apparatus set up."

The stir of feverish activity followed. The tension let up a little. The men lit cigarettes and conversed in a low murmur.

Mike Kenyon, watching the proceedings narrowly, exhaled a grey plume of smoke. This would be the last attempt, he knew. There wouldn't be time for another one.

**B**Y THE SPHERE, another complex mechanism began to take shape. It was soon discernible as two silvery tubes, with the ends turned toward each other, mounted on a tripod. Connections and adjustments were made. The whine of the atom motor sounded again.

From the twin tubes invisible excitatory rays tuned to the same wavelength stabbed into the stubborn metal of the hull. There was no heat, no sound. The men craned closer with staring eyes. As far as Mike Kenyon could see, nothing was happening. For fifteen long minutes the rays played against the metal. There was no change.

Thorpe's face was swiftly growing haggard. He shifted his position, and hunched over the tubes as if to make them do by sheer force of will what they were unable to accomplish themselves. Another fifteen minutes dripped away. Still there was no change in the metal of the hull.

Thorpe sagged in utter dejection. "It's hopeless. My device will not even affect it."

"What in the world can it be?" Matson cried wildly. "Will nothing penetrate it?"

"How about acid?" a reporter suggested.

Thorpe whirled on him savagely. "Every acid in existence has already been tried. They hardly wet the damn stuff. About the only thing that'll touch it is a universal solvent. If you've got one, give it to me!"

"We're licked, then—and even before we've begun to fight!" a tall, grey-haired man in a military uniform said dully. Mike Kenyon knew him and respected him. General Kettering had been through two wars and had distinguished himself in each. He could understand a war in which his opponents had weapons like his own. He could even enjoy it. But a war like the one impending was like taking candy from a baby—with America on the losing end. The wars he had fought would be like mere street-fights in comparison.

"Wait!" a voice cried suddenly.

Kenyon was whirled around as if by a physical blow at the wild, unrestrained excitement that had been in that voice. Warren Parkes, an astro-physicist, shouldered his way into the circle of men about the sphere.

"Thorpe, I think I've got a solution to the problem! The metal is almost similar in density to neutronium, and thus there can be no heat, because the atoms are too compact to allow the molecules to vibrate freely. Do you see? Now, if we could cause the atomic orbits to expand in some manner, we would be able to open it easily!"

There were enthusiastic shouts from several men. "Kovinsky can do

it! He shrunk a six-inch block of metal to two inches, and grew it to six inches again!"

Thorpe's eyes were glowing with renewed hope. "Why haven't we thought of it before?" he cried. "Expansion of the atomic orbits is just the answer! But there is no time to waste. Every second counts. Bring Kovinsky here! Take a truck along to bring whatever equipment he might need. Hurry!"

No men were designated, but several dashed from the room. A fierce joy, a rejuvenated hope was on the face of every man. America might be saved yet!

Mike Kenyon was hastily scribbling notes on his pad, as Thorpe and his crew cleared away the unsuccessful vibration-ray apparatus. Kenyon felt that the *Daily Signal* would be printing his story yet.

**F**ROM OUTSIDE the building came the sudden roar of an approaching gyrocycle. An orderly came in at a dead run. He was a young man, but his face was lined and old. He saluted General Kettering quickly.

"They've come, sir!" he bit out tersely. "San Francisco and Los Angeles have just fallen!"

General Kettering stared at the man before him as though he couldn't and didn't want to believe what he had just heard. His lower teeth came up over his grey mustache and bit hard. Slowly, he looked from the men standing pale and wide-eyed around him to the huge globe gleaming dully under the illumination of the floodlights. Then he nodded and his shoulders straightened. Briskly, he strode from the room.

A numbing cold where his blood had coursed, Mike Kenyon watched him go. The invaders had come! In

a matter of days, America would be no more. Its proud buildings would be devastated, its green countrysides laid waste. Its people would go the way of all vanquished.

Only a slim hope was left. A man named Kovinsky had learned to compress and expand the orbits of the atom. Would that man be able to expand the orbits of the atoms in the metal of the globe, so that the globe could be opened and whatever weapons it contained made available to America? Would he be able to do it in time? And what if there were no weapons in the globe?

America, the last stronghold of Earthmen, fallen! Earth, the possession of an alien race!

It wasn't a pretty picture, and Mike Kenyon shuddered at the thought of it. The other men were thinking about the same thing, and they didn't like it either. Kenyon threw a look of baffled rage at the globe resting so solid and impregnable there in the middle of the great room.

And with the look he stiffened, as though frozen suddenly by an absolute-zero wind.

For an incredible thing was happening to the globe. Outlined in flickering white, a circle approximately six feet in diameter was taking shape on the lower surface of the hull!

At Mike Kenyon's amazed shout, the other men whirled around. They stiffened, too, and stood staring. The circle was taking on solidity and width.

"What—what is it?" Matson whispered.

"Someone—or something—in that globe is opening up an exit!" Mike Kenyon answered him. Kenyon broke off, shaken at his own words. Someone—or something—in that globe was accomplishing what they had been un-



able to do. It was effecting an opening in the globe. That meant people—living beings—were still alive inside! But that was impossible! More than thirty years had passed since the globe had landed. How could living beings remain alive during that time, completely sealed up? Or were they a life form that was independent of air, water, and food? What would they look like? Human, or something sickeningly repulsive? And would they be friendly or enemical?

**MIKE KENYON** felt wound up tight inside. The events of the last few hours had been nerve-wracking enough, but this sudden manifestation of life from within the globe was infinitely worse.

There were sibilant intakes of breath from the watching men. Mike Kenyon crouched forward expectantly. The white line had vanished—the door in the hull was opening inward!

From that opening, swaying weakly, dressed in strange, glittering garments, stepped a man!

There could be no doubt about it. In form and feature he was undeniably human. He was dressed in a bright, metallic tunic that fell to his knees and was gathered about his waist by a broad belt. Over his red hair lay an intricately decorated helmet. Behind him other men began crowding. They stared about dazedly.

With a joyful shout, Kenyon and the other men surged forward. From dozens of throats eager questions poured forth upon the men who had come from the globe. The ominous, strained silence of a moment ago was shattered. The great room echoed and re-echoed to the noise of fifty voices in wild excitement.

The red-haired leader smiled and raised an arm for silence. He began

speaking in a low, rhythmic tongue.

Mike Kenyon clamped his lips tight in desperation. This man from the globe just didn't understand. He thought they were a welcoming committee, and was making a speech appropriate to the occasion. Every second was a precious jewel, rolling forevermore beyond possession. There was no time for speeches.

Mike Kenyon knew that he had to make the stranger from the globe understand that somehow. He had to make him understand that the life of every man in that room was hanging by a mere thread—and that thread was time. But suppose he couldn't make him understand?

Raising a hand, Mike Kenyon stepped forward. The urgency of what was in his mind was reflected in his face. Kenyon pointed to the globe, then to the roof stretching high above. He counted on his fingers, his face and gestures expressive of a great sum. He made stabbing noises and hissing sounds. In the same sign talk he told of whole buildings being blown up, of men dying in utter agony.

And the leader of the globe-men understood!

This fact gratified Mike Kenyon. But at the same time he was bewildered. For with the understanding that came to the red-haired leader, came a great fear!

Somehow this man from the globe had had experience with the invaders. Somehow he had had occasion to feel the cruelty of their hand, see the results of their destruction. And memory of all that caused his face to go pale.

**AT THE SAME** time it caused him to remember something. It made him remember the desperate purpose that had brought him winging billions

of miles through the gulf of space. A stone-like firmness came to his face. Something that was a deep pain and a great hate came into his eyes.

He whipped back into the globe, and, wondering, Mike Kenyon waited. A short while later the leader was back. In his hands he held two metal skull-caps that were covered with an intricate web of metal. He tossed aside his helmet and placed one of the skull-caps upon his head. The other he handed to Kenyon.

Kenyon didn't know what the strange device was for, or what it would do. But he did what was wanted of him; he placed it upon his own red hair. And then a startled oath burst from his lips. The moment he had donned it, a voice had spoken to him inside his mind!

He knew what it was then—a telepathic device. By means of it two people could talk in thoughts, the medium which knew no differences of language or race.

"The invaders have come to your world?" was the repeated thought.

Mike Kenyon nodded and reviewed mentally the vicious attack that had started with England and led now to America. "Can you help us?" he concluded.

"I—I don't know," came the stuning answer.

Mike Kenyon went cold. "You mean you have no weapons?"

"None in the ship which would overcome the invaders."

No weapons! was Kenyon's agonized thought. The last hope to save America was gone. The people from the globe would not be able to help them after all.

Suddenly a man burst into the room, yelling frantically. "The invaders are over New York! Boston is in flames!"

The building which housed the globe

was less than ten miles from New York. The invaders would soon be there.

Swiftly, while confusion and panic reigned among the men, Kenyon relayed the information to the leader of the globe-men.

"Do not despair," the red-haired stranger answered. "When I said I had no weapons with which to conquer the invaders, I meant that I had no weapons in the ship. We have a weapon hidden here on your planet—a powerful and deadly weapon called the Arcron. But we do not know if we will find it. It is mostly a legend of our race, but our main purpose in coming here was to see if it might exist."

"We must seek that weapon then!" Kenyon's thought stabbed out. "Even if we can save a handful of people, that would be better than a complete massacre!"

"Let us go," said the leader. "Explain to your men that they must remain here. There is no room for them in the ship." Among his people red hair was a sign of bravery, and leadership ability, and all leaders and rulers were chosen by that token. The leader of the globe-men assumed that, since Mike Kenyon had red hair, he must be the leader of the men in the room. The mistake was a natural one, and Mike Kenyon was destined to go down in history because of it.

QUICKLY, Kenyon told the men of what was going to take place. There were howls of protest when they learned that he was the only one of them going on the globe, but when Kenyon explained that there was no room, they soon quieted. Since only one man could go, there could be no better man than Mike Kenyon. They all knew and liked him.

Kenyon waved an arm and they

cheered. They knew they all might die, but they cheered anyway.

A warm, choking lump in his throat, Kenyon followed the leader of the globe-men into the ship. They made their way through narrow, winding corridors, climbed ladders, and came out at last to a large room, which was filled with machinery, covered with dials, gauges, levers, and buttons. This, Kenyon was told, was the control room.

There were several men in the control room already, and at an order from the leader, they leaped to the controls. Breathlessly, Mike Kenyon watched. Things were happening which no reporter had ever witnessed, and he knew that, if he lived, he'd have the greatest scoop in newspaper history.

Suddenly Kenyon had a sensation of lightness, and at the same time he felt an electrical tingle. There was no sound, but somewhere in the ship tremendous forces were stirring into life.

The leader of the globe-men strode to a large, pearly screen on one side of the control room. Under his hand it leaped into life. The chaotic whirl of color steadied and came to a focus. The walls of the building leaped into view. As the leader rapped out, another order, the walls began to move, sliding downward. The globe was rising.

Gently it touched the roof of the building and began to push against it. Like a ball pushed through tissue paper, it burst out into the open air.

The leader of the globe-men turned to Kenyon. "My name is Delin," he said. "My people and I are known as Atlins. We have come from a planet in the system of the star you know as Sirius. How did it come about that our ship was located inside that build-

KENYON explained, and Delin stared in amazement. "Thirty of your years? Why—that is incredible! But wait! I think I have the answer. The automatic release on the suspended animation cabinets must have failed to function when we landed. Something went wrong, and we were kept in suspended animation longer than we were supposed to have been. You see, that is the only method by which one can cross the stars without growing old or going insane. Your men did something to the automatic release that activated it and set us free again."

"The vibration-ray!" Kenyon ejaculated. Swiftly, he told Delin about Thorpe's device.

The Atlin nodded. "That must be it." He turned away as one of his men approached him with a question. From a drawer he took out a long, metal tube. He unscrewed the top and withdrew from the container a roll of parchment. He spread it out upon a chart table.

It was a map, Kenyon saw, an old, old map that must have come out of antiquity itself. It depicted a group of seven islands, with strange signs and figures covering them. The largest island had a red circle drawn about one corner of it.

Sight of the map reminded Kenyon of something Delin had said before. Now that he had the time to think about it, he found it unbelievable. Delin had said that they had come to Earth to seek a hidden weapon which would defeat the invaders. What was that weapon doing on Earth? How had it gotten on Earth in the first place?

The leader of the Atlins had finished giving his men directions from the map. He turned back to Kenyon.

"I have caught your last thoughts," Delin stated. "I will try to answer than as shortly and as comprehensive-

ly as I can, though the history of my people is not as clear as it might be.

"Old legends tell of a device called the Arcron, which was a weapon so powerful and deadly that the old Atlins feared to take it with them when they migrated to Corlin, our home planet in the system of Sirius. Apparently, my people originally came from your planet. Some of the old legends tell of the mighty civilization that existed here thousands upon thousands of years ago upon a group of seven islands called Atlin."

"Atlantis of mythical fame!" Kenyon ejaculated. "So the place really existed after all!"

"Historians," Delin went on, "say that the reason for the Great Migration was because of a catastrophe that overtook the islands, causing them to sink into the ocean. Obviously, fearing that Earth was doomed, my people manned their spaceships and set out for the stars. They had already enjoyed interplanetary travel, it seems, and so set out for the distant stars in the hope that one of them might contain a planet in its system that was habitable, as the worlds in this system were not. Eventually, they landed on Corlin, a planet of Sirius, naming it after the main island of old Atlin."

"ON CORLIN my people founded a new civilization and a new culture. For thousands of years we lived in peace and prosperity. Then came the invaders, who unleashed death and destruction among us. We fought them with every weapon we had, but their weapons were superior to ours, and slowly and surely they were winning.

"Realizing the hopelessness of further struggle, we equipped our ships hastily and set out for the planet from which we had come, determined to

find the Arcron and make a last stand should the invaders pursue us. Of all the ships that set out, it seems that mine is the only one which reached Earth safely. Fortunately, the automatic pilot functioned properly, and we did not crash upon landing." Delin stopped, shaken at the host of bitter memories that his words had brought back to life.

"Who are the invaders?" Kenyon asked. "Where have they come from?"

"Not even we know that. But I think I know the purpose behind their attacks. No—it is not invasion. For they would have been satisfied with my world, and would not have molested yours. Have you not sometime hunted the wild animals of your planet for sport? That is perhaps why the invaders are annihilating us—for sport. We may be merely animals, or less than animals, to them."

Kenyon's mind reeled. Cosmic hunters, combing the Universe for game! Beings to whom they were less than animals!

"But that's impossible!" Kenyon burst out. "I can't conceive of an intelligent people killing off a less intelligent people just for the fun of it. Surely, beings of intelligence enough to build spaceships and weapons can't be as sadistic and merciless as savages!"

Delin's answering thought was gently reasoning. "Who can say that intelligence is the same the Universe over? How can one be sure that all intelligence is accompanied by mercy and benevolence? As people differ, so does intelligence. The countless number of races in the Universe would not have the same mental outlook toward one another. And who can say where intelligence ends and insanity begins?"

Suddenly a shout of alarm burst from the lips of one of the men at the controls. Kenyon whirled around. In

the vision plate he saw three of the invader spheres hurtling toward them!

The invaders had noticed the strange globe. They were attacking!

A snarl of hate contorting his features, Delin brushed his men from the controls. As the first of the invader rays darted toward them, Delin shot the ship down and up, like a ball thrown in an underhand flip. The invader spheres swept by where they had been. The ship strained in protest as Delin turned on the full power of the gravity propulsion units.

**W**ATCHING the screen tensely, Kenyon saw the invaders come around in a long sweep. Swiftly, they came in pursuit. The distance between the globe of the Atlins and the spheres of the invaders slowly began to shorten.

Kenyon's eyes were riveted to the deadly drama taking place on the screen. His muscles were contracted tensely. The last hope for the salvation of America rested on this globe reaching its goal. But the invaders were incredibly fast. Soon, he knew, they would be overtaking them. The Arcron would lie forever in its hiding place beneath the waves.

Even if they did escape the invaders, suppose the Arcron could not be found? Suppose the deadly weapon had never existed—had only been a legend after all?

A ray from one of the pursuing invader spheres flashed out. Kenyon was thrown off balance as Delin put the globe in a wild swerve. Another ray leaped across their path. Delin barely managed to avoid it.

The Atlin stood with legs wide-braced before the controls. His lips were a bloodless line. His grey eyes were burning slits focussed upon the vision plate.

The globe whirled, swerved, and darted under Delin's agile hands. Mike Kenyon couldn't read the dials and gauges, but he knew they were traveling at a terrific speed. Such glimpses as he got of what was below them told him that they were already far out over the Atlantic. For all he knew, they might have gone completely around the Earth already.

As if acting upon a sudden decision, the three invader spheres, which had been strung out behind the fleeing globe, now separated. From three different directions they converged down upon the Atlin ship. Swift comprehension made Kenyon cry out. They intended to make the globe the center of a hell of criss-crossing rays!

But Delin had already realized the implications of the maneuver. With a suddenness that threw everyone against the walls, he stopped the globe. The stabbing rays met just feet short of their mark. Before they could swing around, Delin dropped the ship like a plummet toward the water.

Already jolted by the sudden stop, Kenyon was banged against the floor as the globe smacked into the waves with a mighty splash. A kaleidoscopic whirl of color raced across the vision plate. When it steadied, the blue of the sky was no longer visible. All about was the blue-green of water. The color deepened and grew black as the globe sank downward.

**K**ENYON COULD see no sign of the invader spheres because of the opacity of the water. But he knew that they must be clinging grimly to their trail.

Delin turned the controls over to one of his men. He crossed to the chart table where the map was spread, and read off directions to the man at the controls. Long minutes passed.



Delin was watching the flickering needle of a dial. Occasionally, he compared the readings with those on the map. Suddenly he barked out a command. The ship came to a halt.

Where the inky black of the water as seen in the vision plate had been, there now leaped into life an amazing scene. An apparatus designed to enable one to see through water without the aid of a searchlight had gone into action.

Kenyon sucked in his breath. He was staring at a sunken city—and what a city it was! He couldn't see all of it. What he saw, however, was suggestive of its size and beauty. It was a city such as he had never seen before, dwarfing into insignificance all that he had seen. In comparison New York was a sprawling village built crudely of mud and metal.

Slowly the globe cruised over the vast metropolis beneath the water. Delin was watching the buildings go past in the screen. Suddenly he snapped into rigidity, and barked out another order. Below them was a strangely fashioned building. It looked like a great cube with a concave depression in the top.

Delin took over the controls again. Under his guiding hands, the globe moved directly over the top of the building. Then slowly and cautiously it began to float down. There was a faint grind as the ship settled into the depression.

Delin gave out further orders. The men went from the control room. The red-haired leader of the Atlins turned to Kenyon. Both had retained their telepathic helmets.

"We have reached our destination," Delin explained. "The ship rests upon a specially designed storage building, which was built after the catastrophe. It is so constructed that globes like

ours can settle upon it and men pass freely from ship to building without hindrance from the water. Come. We shall now seek the Arcron."

THE INTERIOR of the building was filled with an indescribable variety of objects ranging from furniture to machinery. Kenyon watched with held breath as the men searched. Would they find the Arcron? Or would they learn that it was only a legend after all?

Time dragged away endlessly as the men toiled in the torch-lit gloom. Kenyon grew more anxious and desperate with each passing minute. It didn't look like the men would find anything. Delin's face was becoming haggard.

"Have you any idea of what the Arcron looks like?" Kenyon asked the leader of the Atlins.

"Only from the legends," Delin answered dully. "They say that it is a huge and deadly weapon, identifiable by a curious symbol stamped in the top. You can see that there is no such thing in this room."

A flash of realization went through Kenyon. Legends, he knew, magnified things beyond all proportion. Then—"What if it isn't a huge weapon?" he questioned in excitement. "Does a weapon have to be huge in order to be deadly? Maybe your men haven't found the Arcron because they are searching for something big, when the Arcron is really small!"

Delin's eyes glittered with rekindled hope. "You might be right!" he cried. Swiftly, he relayed the information to his men. They looked doubtful, but they began the search all over again. To them the Arcron was as big as a house and frightening to gaze upon. They couldn't conceive of anything small and compact.

At intervals a man would dash up

to Delin with some object in his hands. Each time it proved to be anything but the weapon they were seeking.

Kenyon watched as another man approached Delin. In his hands he carried a small, metal box, about one foot square. From the front of it projected a cone-like snout. On the sides were levers and buttons. It was heavy, but the man carrying it plainly didn't expect much of it.

Wearily, Delin examined the dust-covered device. Suddenly his hands were trembling. "The Arcron!" he shouted. "This is the Arcron! It has the identifying symbol on the top!"

For a moment there was a stunned silence in that storage room beneath the water. The men stared dumbly, hardly daring to believe what they had just heard. Then the room was echoing to a mighty cheering. The men sobbed and pummeled each other in pure joy.

There was a grim smile on Delin's tired face. "Now," his thought came to Kenyon, "we mete out justice to the invaders!"

At a run, Kenyon followed the leader back into the globe. He was wildly exultant. The Arcron had been found!

As they entered the control room, a man spoke swiftly to Delin. Kenyon caught the meaning from the leader.

The invaders had found them and were getting ready to strike a finishing blow!

Delin leaped to the controls. At a mad, dizzy speed, the globe hurtled up through the water. It burst into the air with a suddenness that left sheets of the liquid falling from it like rain. Then Delin was running toward the airlock, which had not been closed. His pulse, hammering, Kenyon followed. He was in time to see the

three pursuing invader spheres leap from the waves.

Delin was gripping the Arcron. There was a savage eagerness on his face.

The invaders came hurtling toward them. From the foremost sphere a ray flashed out.

Swiftly, Delin raised the Arcron. He sighted it through the open airlock—pressed the white button that jutted prominently from the side.

There was no flare of light, no sudden hum of titanic power. Nothing seemed to happen. Kenyon's heart sank leadenly. The Arcron didn't work!

And then he was lifted from his feet and thrown across the room as if by a tremendous gust of wind. His ears were shattered by a sound that might have been made by a thousand giants bellowing and shrieking. The globe was tossed like a leaf in a hurricane.

Kenyon was battered and shaken. He nearly lost consciousness as his head banged stunningly into a wall. His body was aching and numb. Things whirled dizzily in chaos.

And then it was quiet again. When Kenyon and the others were able to crawl to the airlock, only the blue of the sky met their gaze. There was no trace of the invader spheres. They had been blown into primal atoms.

Delin was grinning like a boy. He got to his feet and loosed a shout of triumph. "The hunter now becomes the hunted! We will be avenged for our dead, our devastated cities!" He turned to Kenyon, and his next thought sang in exultation. "Now we go to your America—and blast the invaders forever from the world!"

Kenyon grinned with him, a dazed, happy grin. America was saved! Some of its cities might have been de-

stroyed but they could be rebuilt. Some of its people may have been killed but a few generations would see them back in number. And, lending a hand in everything, would be the Atlins with their science and their culture. A new era was dawning for Earth.

As Kenyon climbed weakly to his feet, he remembered something. His face, streaked with blood from a cut in his scalp, grew wistful. "I hope there's a newspaper building still standing somewhere," he muttered. "What a scoop I've got!"

## THE END

# No Glamor In Space

By

Sid Overman

**O**N SEVENTY-THIRD street the big stone and aluminum hulk of the Archives Building looms up. Most people think of it as a glorified space-library; few realize that it is a lot more than a library. It's the clearing house of the Solar System, so to speak, and between its books and films, its logs, and above all the conversation of the spacemen who spend time in the Club or the Bar, you can find out just about anything about space that you want.

Space travel has only been with us thirty-five years, yet it seems like an eternity—which is the main reason I've become its historian. Interplanetary asked me to sift through the records and bring some coherence out of the enormous amounts of data that have been accumulated. That's the reason I spend so much time at Archives—and a good portion of that in the Bar.

One evening the conversation had got around to predictions and prognostications. Baines, a long, skinny pilot who'd recently been shifted to the Jovian run—the satellites, that is—was nursing a glass in his hands and talking:

"...I don't think anybody can predict the future of space travel. The technological advances are progressing at such a furious rate that any prediction is obsolete before it's been spread."

I looked kind of doubtful. He glanced at me.

"Don't you believe it?" he asked. The question was rhetorical. He went on. "Look,

fifteen years ago we were still proud of the space stations and the Luna run. Now look at us. We're running out to the Jovian satellites. Neptune's next, then Pluto. Would you have guessed that fifteen years ago?"

"No," I admitted, "I wouldn't have. But then Atomics has done a terrific job. It looks like the old science-fiction boys were righter than they knew. They had man flitting around the Solar System just about as rapidly as its happened."

"I have to agree," Baines said, "they didn't exaggerate at that. All in all, those old writers knew pretty well the course of coming events. As prognosticators they weren't too bad. Except for one thing."

"What was that?"

"War and fighting."

"War and fighting?" I echoed. "What do you mean? There hasn't been any of that in space."

"I'm speaking of Space Patrol actions, naturally."

"Yes, of course," I said, "but what do you mean about the science-fiction writers' being all wrong?"

"Did you ever read one of those old-timers' descriptions of a fight between rockets or space craft? They described it as sort of a glorified battle between aircraft here on Earth. They missed one point. They didn't realize that the speeds and velocities of space ships are so fantastically high that the ordinary ideas of combat, as felt by them, simply don't apply to battle in the void."

"Come to think of it," I agreed, "I see what you mean. I can remember the rockets zooming toward one another, firing rockets and guns and in general creating havoc."

"It's a joke," Baines smiled. "Let me tell you how tough the idea of real space fighting is...."

He took another pull at his drink and then began.

"Four weeks ago," he said, "Command ordered me to take a patrol cruiser and hunt down and knock out somebody who was landing and raiding the Martian Colony Outposts. That sounds like a straightforward assignment with no strings attached. The orders read: 'you will locate

(Cont'd On Page 109)

# WOMEN WON'T WORK

By Sam Dewey

"DID YOU see Regulation K?" Jerry McBride asked Ken Walters.

Ken shrugged his husky frame lower in the bar-seat and took another pull at his glass. "Don't give me Company routine now, Jerry," he said, "I'm enjoying myself. I haven't been in Venusport for six weeks. When I get back into the Outlands, then's time enough to groan about Company policy. I'm delivering eighty pounds a week of quality bio-gen. The Company's happy, I'm happy—why worry?"

"Last time I saw you, you wanted an assistant, didn't you?" Jerry asked.

"Sure. I've said that a dozen times, but so has every mucker. Look, Jerry, you've been in the Outlands; you know what it's like. You're working over a pod and there'll be a 'meebie' behind you before you know it, or you'll park the crawler for some shut-eye and wake up with your skull bashed in by a 'slimer'. All of us muckers have raised hell with the Company representatives but they tell us to forget it. They're not paying passage from Terra for non-producers. The Company wants to make money."

"Believe me Ken, I sympathize with you boys all right."

"I'm sorry, Jerry," Ken said. "I know you know our set-up. But go ahead, give me the dope on Regulation K."

A few hours later, Ken checked out of the Company offices. It was a two hundred mile run to his Outland sector and a crawler couldn't make it in less than five or six hours even if a good portion of the trip was over water. He was feeling better too, not only because the "Prima" had been good, but also because of Regulation "K". "In accordance with enlightened Company policy, it has at last been possible to supply assistants to garners—" the Company didn't call its employees muckers—"and present arrangements were to supply them as seniority dictated..." With two years of straight Outland work, Ken felt he stood a good chance of getting an assistant. He had one all right.

He didn't notice until he'd actually dropped behind the wheel of the crawler that he had company. He turned abruptly and found himself staring into the face of a girl. In the damp humid atmosphere, like all workers, she wore little more than Ken did—a breechclout and a gun—supplemented by a halter that did things for her figure. Over this she wore naturally a

pliofilm cover and a respirator helmet, but the transparent plastic concealed none of her charms.

They reached the Swamp-Forest which lay between Ken's pod-beds and the Great Sea. Ken was forced to talk.

"If you can handle a gun," he said, "now's your chance to show it. This is meebie territory and if we get bogged down we'll see them. Keep your eyes open."

He had to admit the girl was competent. She sat back to back with him, her rifle gripped firmly and her eyes never resting, flitting from object to object, watching the overhanging verdure or casing the clumpy ground.

Before the magnesium shelter, Ken spun the crawler and killed its turbos. The whine of the motors ceased for the first time in six hours and he got out stiffly. The girl seemed as fresh as ever and the enthusiasm and wonder in her face had removed the last traces of sullenness and anger which Ken had provoked.

Ken swung open the outer door of the airlock and in his preoccupation with recent events, he forgot to check before he stepped in. His mistake was instantly realized—but too late. Before he could move, tentacular pseudopods had gripped him and he was held immobile in the rigid grasp of a meebie! Lorane, two feet in his wake, stepped back in time and her rifle came up.

"Don't shoot!" Ken said desperately, "you'll miss the cell center in this darkness and the convulsions of the meebie will squash me. Stay back!"

Ken had seen wounded meebies in their death convulsions. So long as he remained wrapped around his prey, the meebie was content to corrode away with acid juices the pliofilm covering to get at the morsel beneath. He wouldn't take desperate action unless hurt.

The girl said calmly. "Ken, don't move. I'm coming in. I've got a light and a pistol. I'll nail him right in the cell center."

Ignoring his warnings, the girl squirmed through the narrow opening between the meebie's body and Ken's immobile frame. Pseudopods made tentative exploration and she was partially engulfed.

She switched on the light and in one swift moment she swung the beam across the formless, amorphous mass of the meebie. The beam spotted the reddish pulsating cell center. Her pistol came up and she fired once. There was a reflex convulsion, utterly feeble and the tentacular crips fell away from both she and Ken.

Ken stood there; less awed by his narrow escape than by the absolute courage and audacity of the girl.

She was trembling slightly in reaction and instinctively Ken put his arm around her. "It's all right Lorane," he said softly, "I think we'll make swell partners, me and my assistant..."

"I'm glad Ken," Lorane said, "I'm





He fell back from the lethal charge — or did he?



# SIDE ROAD TO GLORY

By

Robert Eggert Lee

**He didn't remember dying although the bolt  
of electricity should have killed him in an  
instant. Nor did he understand why years  
had passed when he came home from work**

**K**ENT NORTON lay immobile beneath the bedcovers, his muscles gathered into taut bunches. Through half-closed eyes, he peered into the pale moonlight which poured in through an open window, and his ears strained for a repetition of the sound which had awakened him.

It came again—a metallic click. Almost immediately there followed a faint rustling and a sibilant swish. Norton's lips drew back from his teeth, and cold fury surged into his eyes as realization of what the sounds meant burst upon him. There was someone in the room! And, from the sounds he had heard, it was apparent that the intruder had not only found, but had opened the tiny wall safe which he had thought so cleverly hid-

den! He'd been very wrong.

Kent Norton did not waste further time; he acted with his usual diabolic efficiency. Drawing up his knees, he reached with both hands for the pillow behind his head. With doubled arms and legs acting as a catapult, he threw it. The pillow hit the burglar with force and accuracy, knocking him against the wall, momentarily off balance. Before the man could recover himself, Kent had left the bed in a tigrish leap, bearing him to the floor.

Kent fought coldly, scientifically, intending to subdue the man as quickly as was possible. His hands were seeking vital nerve centers when the dazed and breathless burglar came to life. He struck out savagely and silently with the desperation of a rat

in a trap. Kent was forced to give way before the sudden attack.

The burglar seized this opportunity to writhe to his feet. Kent attempted to follow the maneuver, but a lashing foot smashed into his chest, and he was knocked backward, pain stabbing through him.

As he struggled to rise, he saw the figure of his opponent bent over him—and he saw the arm raised menacingly, holding something that gleamed dully. Kent threw up an arm to ward off the blow—but too late. His brain exploded in an inferno of roaring sound and wildly cascading streaks of incandescent light.

**K**ENT STRUGGLED back to consciousness vaguely aware that someone was shaking his arm and anxiously calling his name. Water trickled down his face and neck.

"Kent! Kent! For heaven's sake, man, what happened?"

Kent raised a hand to his head; it throbbed with the insistency of a steam-hammer. There was a large lump above one ear. He grinned without mirth and looked with burning eyes into the face of the man kneeling by his side.

"What happened, Kent?" repeated Fred Satterly. "I heard noise in here, and came running. You were on the floor, out cold."

"Something happened that we've been waiting for all along," replied Kent, and the fire in his eyes burned deeper. "Did you see the safe, Fred?"

Fred stared at him dumbly; then his head turned slowly to the wall where a small, round door swung open to reveal a yawning hole. Color crept from his face, leaving it white and somehow sick. He crept to his feet, still staring. In a walk that was almost a stagger, he crossed to the safe.

"Empty," he said dully. He leaned against the wall, shoulders sagging.

"Oh, Fred..."

A small, chestnut-haired woman stood in the doorway. Fred turned to her.

"Go back to bed, Rose," he said.

The woman looked with wide eyes from her husband to where Kent sat on the floor. She took her lower lip between her teeth and went out.

Kent's face was satanic. "The formula's gone, of course," he said in tones that were hard and flat. "Wentel's got it. He was afraid to take the case into court. He didn't want the world to know that elemental transmutation was a fact. The only way he could get it without giving away anything was to steal it. He did that. Some thief he probably hired did the job." He staggered to his feet, and began pulling off his pajamas.

"I told you!" accused Fred bitterly. "We discovered the process while in the employ of the Wentel Chemical Research Foundation. The formula was therefore the rightful property of Clay Wentel. But you wouldn't see it that way..."

"And I still don't," answered Kent calmly as he slipped into clothing. "We never liked Wentel, Fred. And he never liked us either. He's hated us since college days. We both know that he hired us only because of our scientific capabilities. Do you think he'd miss the opportunity to knock us down?" He laughed softly. "No, Fred. If we handed the formula over to him, we'd never even get a smell of the proceeds. Wentel goes whole hog or nothing, you know that."

Fred looked uncertain, swayed as always by Kent's dominance. "But he...he wouldn't dare to destroy the reputation his father gave the Foundation. Richard Wentel was noted for

his honesty in dealing with discoveries made by men in his employ. He wouldn't..."

KENT FINISHED tying his shoe laces and stood up. He curled his lips a little. "You've always had the habit of looking only at the bright side of things, Fred. I find it damned annoying at times. Look here. With the formula for element transmutation in his hands, do you think Wentel would give a thought to what his father did? He wouldn't. And why should he? The formula would give him power, Fred—incalculable power. The entire economic and financial structure of the world would be in his grasp. He'd destroy the value of gold! He'd make stocks worth less than their weight in paper! He'd be able to become dictator of the United States—of the world! Nice thought, eh, Fred?"

Fred shook a thoughtful head at the gaping safe. "It... it's awful!" he breathed.

"I don't like it either, Fred. Because, you see, I intend to become dictator of the world!"

Fred stared at him in speechless amazement. "Are you crazy?" he got out at last.

Kent laughed tightly. "I was never saner in my life. I've always been ambitious. I've always wanted to sit at the top of the heap. The formula offered me the chance to do that. Wentel won't stop me just because he has a claim on it!"

"The formula is mine just as much as it is yours! Are you thinking to—"

"Don't be a fool!" said Kent harshly. "Do you think I'd cheat you out of your share? Whatever plans I made always included you—and don't forget that!" He looked with blazing eyes at Fred as he pulled open a

drawer. From its interior he drew an automatic, glanced at it briefly, and pushed it into a pocket.

"What... what are you going to do?" breathed Fred in horror.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you." Kent glanced at his wristwatch. "It's nearly three-thirty, a nice time of the morning to kill a man. Wentel has become more of an obstacle than I thought he'd be. I'm going to remove him from my path to glory, Fred."

Fred looked into Kent's smoldering eyes and his face became gray. But as he looked the color faded. Something indefinable crept into his eyes. Very slowly, he began to release the cord which bound his robe. "I... I'm going with you!"

For a moment mockery replaced the fire in Kent's eyes. Both faded to be replaced by a gleam of admiration. He shook his head. "There'll be consequences, Fred. My plans don't include you. I'll be able to pull this off easily—I'm not fool enough to rush into this thing without some thought. But you... hell! You got a wife and kid, Fred."

"I'm going with you. Wait for me."

Kent looked at the white face, the set lips. He shrugged. "Come along then," he said. "But kiss your wife and kid—good-by."

Fred turned like an automaton and left. Kent struggled into a topcoat, hardly conscious of his aching head. He picked up a hat, and stood looking at the room for a moment. There were some scattered papers below the safe. He crossed slowly to them, looked down at them, and then picked them up. He went downstairs, stuffing the papers into a pocket.

IN THE library he sat down on the arm of a chair, and lighted a cig-

arette. The dim rays of a night lamp in the hall fell upon his face, accentuating its satanic cast. His thin lips below the flaring nostrils were smiling grimly.

He had always known that the road to the kind of glory he wanted would lead to this. He had always known that sooner or later someone would arise to bar that road. And he had resolved that nothing would stand in his way. He had ability—and the formula would give him the power to use that ability. It would be a vehicle to scoot him to the heights.

Kent stared out into the shadowed, little hall, and the flame in his eyes flickered for a moment. Element transmutation! With the help of Fred Satterly he had solved one of the most controversial problems in the annals of scientific history. He had started with the theory that all matter was unstable, and had ended with the discovery of a new process of electrolysis based upon the maintenance of constant currents of electricity.

As an acid may be ionized in solution with the passing of an electric current, so had he succeeded in ionizing metals and exchanging the atomic structure of the plentiful with the rare.

The most difficult part had been in finding the order of rays through which this atomic change could be made possible. And the answer had been discovered in the form of the Cosmic Ray. The result had been the most astounding scientific discovery of the age.

But only Clay Wentel knew how great it was. He had guessed that they were working on something big, and distrusting and disliking them, he had set spies to watch their activities. Kent had anticipated just that sort of thing. He had left the Wentel

Chemical Research Foundation immediately, and Fred, under the influence of his personality, had left also. Kent did not intend to let Wentel have the power he meant for his own.

With his characteristically dynamic energy Kent had proceeded to lay the foundations for his climb to power. He had meant to use the formula as a tool, for as such it was capable of accomplishing anything. It was a tool that could build a world empire—with Kent Norton on the throne.

The fire blazed once more in Kent's eyes. Wentel had destroyed that carefully-built foundation; he had stolen the tool—the tool which would change such plentiful elements as lead, copper, and iron to gold, platinum, and even radium. Mirthless laughter tugged at his lips—Wentel would be dead by dawn!

Kent stood up as he heard Fred coming down the stairs. He pulled on his hat, wincing a little. He squashed out the glowing butt of his cigarette, looked silently at Fred's set face and went out, feeling for the keys to his car.

IT WASN'T until Kent had the car in motion that Fred spoke. He seemed outwardly calm, and his voice betrayed no unusual amount of fear. But as Kent glanced at him keenly he noticed that a small muscle in his cheek twitched nervously.

"Where do you intend to find Wentel?"

Kent returned his attention to driving, looking straight ahead. "The Foundation would be the logical place," he replied shortly. "Wentel conducts his steals just as he does his business affairs."

"And you, your murder affairs," said Fred, and something that he was trying to keep under control crept

out in his voice.

"This could hardly be called business-like, Fred. I'm going to do this scientifically. In fact, I'm going to commit the so-called perfect crime."

Kent looked at the man beside him, a devil-grin tugging his lips downward. "Do you understand? See here, then. Wentel stole our formula, we go to get it back, we argue, there is a fight, and when things settle down Wentel is on the floor dead. You see? A perfect case of self-defense. And you'll be there to back me up."

Fred did not answer; he stared straight ahead, seeing things he did not like.

The velvety blackness of the sky had given way to a vague purple when Kent brought the car to rest, a block from the Wentel Chemical Research Foundation. The building was a huge, square thing of weathered brick. Its appearance was impressive as befitted a scientific institution. A light shown from beneath the edge of a pulled shade on one of the upper stories.

"It's just as I thought," said Kent. "Our friend Wentel is at home. However, we won't call on him formally; we'll just sneak in and surprise him."

Fred made no reply. Kent made his way out of the car, pulled up the front seat, and extracted a tire tool from a recess within.

"Come along," he said. "I made some mental changes in my former plan, and I wouldn't like to have you back out now."

He led the way across the moist, silent street toward the building. There was a driveway along one side. Kent walked softly and swiftly down this, keeping himself and Fred in the shadows. He turned into an areaway, and stopped.

"This is where we go in, Fred. That window will be easy to force.

Now give me a little hand."

The sill of the window was some two feet over Kent's head. The grimy pane gave evidence of an easy entrance.

At Kent's direction Fred moved in close to the wall, and made a cradle of his tightly-clasped fingers. Kent stepped into it, and was hoisted up to the sill. He worked skillfully and rapidly, and with a little screech the window finally gave.

"Higher now," ordered Kent. There was a hardness in his breathless words that was impossible to define.

The window groaned up. Kent's harsh breathing stopped; he swore softly, yet coldly with rage.

"There's a power cable strung across this damn... let me down."

**F**RED WAS braced against the wall, Kent's feet on his shoulders. He moved downward, body upright, legs slowly bending. His right knee was pressed against the wall, his left was reaching for the gravel of the areaway, foot working slowly as he bent.

And then his shoe slipped, slid on the loose, tiny stones. Fred was immediately thrown off balance by the weight of the man on his shoulders. He fell, sprawling.

As he felt his support suddenly give way beneath him, Kent struck out wildly for something to grasp. But there was nothing but the power cable in the open window to offer a hold.

Kent's clawed hands were reaching for that deadly wire. It was pure instinct; his hair-trigger mind shrieked the warning, but it was too late. His hands were stabbing down with a speed his reflexes could never hope to overcome. In that split-second Kent saw things sharp and clear. He realized that he was doomed, and he snarled at the realization with anger,



horror—and fear.

His palms slapped against the power cable.

There came a fierce flash of blue light. A roaring explosion filled Kent's ears. He felt a momentary twinge of agony, so great that it was almost exquisite. Then followed awful blackness, numbness...and oblivion.

**F**OR THE second time that eventful night Kent Norton fought his way back to the world of consciousness. His senses reeled as though he had been flung through the immensity of space. But things quickly began to normalize. He felt no pain; his body had the feeling it usually had.

He realized that he was lying flat on his back. The surface upon which he lay was smooth and cold. He sat up, thoughts beginning to function. And then he remembered!

The laboratory window...the power cable...that blinding flash of light... Was he dead?

He rose slowly to his feet, staring around him. There was the window he had forced. But was it? He gasped in amazement. *The dim light of the approaching dawn showed a tier of shining, metal bars!*

He looked around wildly, lips clamped against his teeth, a mantle of dread settling about his shoulders. Fred was gone! What had happened to him? A hundred tormenting questions seething in his mind, he moved out into the street.

A cold wind was blowing; it stirred his clothing, chilling the sweat which beaded his face. The light in his eyes kindled into a blaze.

Everything was changed! First the bars across the window of the laboratory—bars where he knew no bars had ever been. And now the street, the houses, a hundred other minor

things—all had undergone a subtle metamorphosis.

Where there should have been the gleaming ribbons of trolley tracks there was nothing. The street had become a continuous sheet of smooth cement. The Foundation was where it always had been. But like the houses around it, the building had taken on an old, weatherbeaten appearance. Newer, taller structures of a simple, severe design rose here and there.

**K**ENT BARED his teeth in a defiant devil-grin. The fire in his eyes was now a shining burn. He knew he wasn't crazy. His senses could not be deceiving him. The miraculous change was not an illusion.

Yet how had it taken place? What had the tremendously high voltage of that power cable done to him?

Kent rejected one wild theory after another. There was only one chance of getting a true answer, and he seized upon it instantly. It was an incredible hope. He pulled up the collar of his topcoat and began walking.

The rising sun was peering over the top of a group of needle towers on the horizon to the east when Kent reached his destination. He stood looking at the little, brick building. Fred Satterly's home, too, had changed. It had the same pall of age he had noticed in all the others. And he had left it little more than an hour ago!

The flame in his eyes leaped up as though in added fuel. Slowly, half in hesitation, he mounted the steps to the door. On one side, below a small square or what appeared to be frosted glass, was a button. And below this was a name-plate. The name was unmistakable.

The devil-grin back at his lips, Kent pressed the button.

The soft cadence of mellow chimes

echoed somewhere in the house. Kent waited, muscles unconsciously tensed in expectation. Here was the answer to everything!

The square of frosted glass suddenly flashed into life. Kent stared at it, momentarily startled. A girl was looking at him, her face a lovely oval framed in the tiny screen. Her grey eyes were regarding him with suspicion, and unless he was mistaken, fear. He wondered.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Her voice seemed to issue from the screen. It echoed the cold distrust in her eyes.

"My name," said Kent slowly, "is Norton—Kent Norton. I want to see Fred Satterly."

The girl seemed to have heard. Her eyes lost some of their suspicion; they became perplexed. "Kent.... Norton? What is this, a trick?"

"I'm Kent Norton, alright. There's no trick about it."

The grey eyes were gazing at him in uncertainty, and the smooth brow was drawn together in a thoughtful frown. "Come in, then," she said at last. "I'll awaken Father."

Kent was musing over the implications of the word *Father* when the door opened. He stepped inside, looking around. There was nobody there. Then a sound reached his ears; he looked up to see the girl coming down the stairs.

He had already guessed her identity—she was Fred's daughter. The last time he had seen Doris Satterly, she had been a child of two—and that had been only several hours ago! The question of what had happened to him occurred again, and this time the answer did not seem so incredible.

possessed something that neither Fred nor his wife had ever had. It was in her face and the way she walked. And she was just as lovely as she had appeared on the screen by the door.

"He'll be down shortly," she said. "In the meantime wouldn't you care to step into the living room and sit down?"

Kent dropped into a chair, and lighted a cigarette. He tried to hide the fact that his hands were trembling. Nervous reaction, he thought contemptuously. But he knew that he was nervous. He was impatient and uncertain too.

The girl stood in the entrance to the room, a robe held about her slender body. In annoyance Kent realized that her grey eyes were keenly watching him.

"Are you really Kent Norton?" she asked.

"Of course!" snapped Kent. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't be?"

"You just can't because—" She broke off as the sound of descending footsteps came to her ears.

Kent heard also; he leaned forward in his chair, muscles tensed in expectation, the cigarette half-poised to his mouth forgotten.

A man walked slowly into the room. He was plainly well over fifty. His shoulders were stooped. His hair was a tousled mass of grey, and deep lines were etched into his gaunt face.

Kent recognized him instantly, for though the years had changed Fred Satterly, they had not changed his eyes. They were as mild and as apprehensive as ever.

Kent's involuntary whisper broke the silence which had fallen upon the room. "Fred!"

For a long moment the man stared speechlessly. Then he drew backward, seeming to shrink into himself.

**T**HE GIRL looked something like Fred's wife had looked. But she

"My God! Kent... Kent Norton!" Fred Satterly stood as if petrified, his aged body trembling. "No! No—it can't be you! *You died twenty years ago!*"

It seemed that he would have fallen had the girl not assisted him into a chair. He sat there, still staring, breathing hard.

Kent laughed harshly, the fire burning in his eyes. "I suspected as much," he said. "But I didn't want to believe it until I had seen you. You're ample proof, Fred."

"I don't understand it," whispered Fred hoarsely. "I remember helping you up to that window in the rear of the Foundation. I remember slipping, and the blinding flash of blue light that followed. When I could see again, you were gone."

"I stayed there half the morning, looking everywhere for you. But you had disappeared. It wasn't until I saw that power cable that I realized what had happened. You were electrocuted! And since your body was nowhere to be found I decided that you had been literally disintegrated."

"Yes, I was electrocuted, Fred. But here I am, very much in the flesh. Rather difficult to explain, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't say that," broke in the girl, her level grey eyes on Kent's. "It's incredible, of course, but don't you see? Through some partial lapse of cosmic forces, probably accentuated by the high voltage of that power cable, you were thrown through the fourth dimension!"

**K**ENT LOOKED at her with admiration and a trace of mockery. "That explains things nicely, if not very clearly," he drawled. "You show astounding intelligence. But what does it matter? I'm here—and that concerns me most."

The girl bit back angry words, her face flushed. Kent ignored her; he looked at Fred Satterly and all other emotions left his face, leaving it hard and tense.

"And what of Clay Wentel, Fred? You didn't put him out of the way for me, did you?"

At mention of the name, Fred and the girl suddenly gave a start. They looked around the room and at the windows. Finally they looked at Kent, and their faces were somehow frightened and bitter.

"You must not speak of Clay Wentel in such a way," cautioned Fred. "Even the walls have ears these days."

"It... it's swift and sudden death," whispered the girl.

"I don't get this!" snapped Kent impatiently. "What's it all about?"

"Clay Wentel is the dictator of America!" answered the girl.

Kent was out of his chair in a bound. He stood over Doris, fists clenched, face twisted, as though he would strike her. Abruptly he turned away and walked to the window where he stared out into the gathering daylight. For a long moment he was silent. Then he turned to the girl and her father.

"Tell me about everything," he requested quietly.

Fred began to talk slowly, in a voice pitched very low. "It all began after you... disappeared. Using our formula Wentel began to manufacture the rarer elements. The first thing he started on was gold. He didn't flood the market immediately. He worked slowly and surely, and it was months before men realized what was happening. When they did all hell broke loose. Someone discovered that Wentel was actually creating the precious element.

"There followed one of the most destructive depressions in the history of the world. It's...well...unnecessary to go into detail about the terror which followed. Men committed suicide, crazed mobs stormed every stock exchange in the world, thousands were thrown out of work. The world was thrown into mad, unrestrained chaos.

"Then came the slow period of readjustment. The entire financial structure of the world was changed. There were drastic social and religious developments also. But before long it became apparent that Clay Wentel was behind nearly every one of the new innovations. And then it was too late to do anything.

"Wentel had been making precious elements all along; he was just about the richest and most powerful man in the world. With the promise of great wealth as a lure, he drew about him a group of men just as ruthless as himself. He built himself a veritable castle in upstate New York, and gathered together an army.

"**WELL**, NOBODY knows just how he did it—but suddenly there was war! If the Element Depression, as it is known, was terrible, the war that followed it was even worse. It was civil war, but shorter and swifter than any war had ever been in our entire history. More than one-half the country was in Wentel's possession when the war was finally drawn to an end.

"Of course, Wentel never intended to stop where he was. He wanted to get things settled down in the new domain he had wrested from a great united country. This consisted of murdering every man who disagreed with his principles. With his enormous army, his regiments of spies, his great wealth, he was soon in solid." The old man paused to rub at his face. It

was as if he were trying to wipe away hateful memories. His eyes were wide and sad.

Kent glanced at the girl; she was looking with brooding eyes at nowhere in particular. The first rays of the rising sun were streaming in through a window. They fell upon the soft contours of her face, and haloed her dark hair, lending her beauty a haunting radiance. Kent would always remember her as she was that morning with the sun on her face.

"Wentel had himself elected president of East America," continued Fred, still more softly. "The election was only a mockery, of course. He was undubitable dictator. But there were not many people who realized that then. Wentel did nothing in those days to antagonize them. He spent more than seven years in the process of getting his portion of America totally under his control.

"The people of West America had elected their own president, and seemed to be satisfied with things as they were. However, they were pretty badly off as Wentel had some of the most important manufacturing centers in the country in his possession. And so it is not hard to understand how Wentel finally won over West America. There was a war, but it was a rather half-hearted affair. Wentel had promised them almost everything—easy-living and luxury. Besides, the people were used to a united country. It had become an ingrained habit through generations. It seemed queer to them to be living in only half a country.

"After Wentel had all of America under his control he really got down to business. There were a lot of prominent men in West America who had fled there after the first war. Wentel killed them off one by one. There were some ex-presidents and senators among them.

"Some of the dictators of the 40's and 50's were pretty cruel, but they become as nothing when compared to Wentel. He gives a thought to nobody but himself; he is completely uninterested in the welfare of the people. The only thing that concerns him is keeping them under submission. He has the country organized under a system more efficient and ruthless than ever seen in Europe. Liberty, equality, and fraternity are only words now, Kent."

"And the beast is not satisfied with what he has!" added Doris fiercely. "He won't stop until the entire world is in his hands. He wants absolute control! Under his influence a war is about to break out in Europe!"

**K**ENT TURNED his blazing eyes on the girl. "And what of the people?" he asked sharply. "How do they feel about Wentel's tyranny?"

"They hate him! They hate him with an intensity that is, well, awful. But they keep that hate hidden, for these days every man is every other man's secret watcher. They have to be, since that is the best job to be had. If you can definitely prove your loyalty for Wentel you're in solid. Wentel's cohorts live like kings. They even have titles, and Wentel himself has a harem."

Fred nodded his grey head. "That's true, Kent. Nobody pays any attention to conventions any more. The Church, marriage, all the finer things have been forgotten. I've had to keep Doris hidden as much as possible from Wentel's beauty seekers. He offers a reward for every pretty girl found for him. America is on the downgrade, and nobody knows when it will stop."

Kent leaped to his feet and began pacing the floor like a tiger. He did look like a tiger with his flaming eyes

and lithe body. But he was a very angry tiger.

"Wentel has got what I've always wanted—power! Absolute power! But god! Look how he's using it! I always intended to use my power to exalt the finer things. I wanted to lift the world from the shackles of stupidity, greediness, and racial hate. I wanted to look upon a great united Earth, a world united in peace and prosperity, not a world built upon a foundation of ruthlessness and terror, and held together by force!" Kent stopped to glare at the girl and her father in turn.

"But I'll do that yet!" he snarled at them. "This fourth dimension business is only a temporary set-back. And the control which Wentel already has over the country means nothing. It's weak. All I have to do is change my plans and then get to work. I was never licked, Fred, because I never started fighting!"

The girl was leaning forward in her chair, and there was something radiant on her face that was not of the sunlight. But her eyes were perplexed.

"I don't understand," she murmured. "You speak as if..."

Kent whirled on her. "Wentel got where he is by means of an invention your father and I made. I had intended to use that invention to place myself on the throne he now occupies. But he stole it—that and my throne.

"You remember my dream, Fred? Do you remember the resolution I made to kill Clay Wentel? I'm going to achieve both!"

"I remember," replied his friend. "It was, and still is, madness!"

"Madness? You've always doubted me, Fred. But you'll have to admit that it was well-planned madness. When I had the formula in my possession, were my dreams madness?"



Why, I had the deadliest weapon in the world, and you know that. Now that Wentel has that weapon means absolutely nothing! I still have one to counter-act it!"

"What do you mean?" gasped the old man.

"The formula, Fred! Remember the formula?" Kent reached into a pocket of his coat and drew forth a fistful of papers. "Here, look at these."

**FRED LOOKED** at them. His fingers began to tremble as he looked and his face went white. Something shiny leaped into his eyes. The years seemed to fall away from his body, leaving him as young as Kent remembered him to be.

"God!" he whispered. "God!" He couldn't say anything more.

"What is it?" asked Doris, in bewilderment.

"Something for which Wentel would use the most painful torture to learn!" snapped Kent. "It is better for you that you remain in ignorance." He turned, his mouth twisted in a devil-grin. "And what of madness, now, Fred?"

"I—I don't know. But I do know this: Though I'm getting old, and pretty useless, I'll follow you to hell!"

"Fine! But get this uselessness idea out of your head. You're going to be invaluable to me. In fact, with your help I'll be able to cut off months of dangerous work. What are you doing now? What sort of work are you employed at?"

"I'm a laboratory technician at one of the government distilleries. The government, you see, must have good liquor. I might add that everything is controlled by the government."

"Good! It couldn't be better. Look, in your work you come into contact with many men. You must know how

these men feel toward Wentel. Talk to some whom you know can be trusted. Try to get them on our side of the fence. If they hate Wentel as much as you say they do, that will be easy. I'll set up a headquarters free from spies, and arrange to have these men at a meeting. That will be all for the present." Kent turned to the girl. "And you? How do you stand? If you're not with me say so, and I'll have you done away with at once."

"Why you—" Doris was on her feet, grey eyes flashing angrily. Her robe fell open at that moment to reveal a glimpse of dainty—and scanty—silk. She made a hasty grab for the loose parts and got herself back under cover. "If you think you can boss me around you're very much mistaken!" she snapped. She was about to resume, but then checked herself as she realized that Kent was frankly grinning. "All right, I'm with you. You know very well that it could be no other way!"

"You haven't changed at all!" laughed Kent. "You were only two the last time I saw you, but you sure could pack a wallop!" For a moment he looked at her hair and her eyes, and then he looked away. He became brisk and hard again. "The most important thing to do right now is eat. After that I'll have to see about some clothes. No doubt mine are out of fashion."

**FOR THE NEXT** few days Kent was intensely busy. As inconspicuously as possible he made trips to the city. From various small shops and factories he made numerous purchases of glass and metal articles. He was careful not to buy too much from one place, and thus bring the attention of Wentel's spies to himself. In the cellar of Fred's home he estab-

lished a makeshift workshop. There he spent most of his time, shaping and assembling the pieces of glass and metal.

Doris' curiosity was aroused to fever pitch, but neither Kent nor her father would enlighten her with so much as a word. She often watched Kent while he was at work, and though she had seen the queer box-like affair he was making slowly take shape, she still knew nothing of its purpose.

The girl was never sure of her true feelings for Kent. With feminine vanity she felt that her beauty deserved some attention. However, Kent never seemed to notice her. There were times when the play of emotions across his face and the vibrant huskiness of his voice fascinated her. But more often she was angered by his harsh curtness and arrogance. She tried to hate him then, but the old fascination would always return.

Fred had meanwhile been busy broaching the subject of a revolution against Wentel to his fellow workers. The task was a delicate one, for there was no knowing when his propaganda would be flowing into the ears of a spy. But due to the utmost caution his efforts were successful. It was not long before he had the men Kent required.

As soon as his mysterious machine was completed Kent held a meeting in his cellar workshop. Nine men, whom Fred had judged to be the most reliable, were present. Heavy cloth blanketed all the windows, and the only sources of illumination were two shaded bulbs in the damp ceiling.

"I suppose you men want to know what this is all about," began Kent. "I had to be certain of your loyalty before I could divulge any information other than that there was to be a revolution against the Wentel regime.

"I want to make it understood in the beginning that this is not going to be a common uprising of the people against a despotic government. Everything we're going to do hereafter is going to be done with plan and method. In fact, I already have a weapon which cannot fail to put victory in our hands. However, without cooperation from you it will be totally useless."

"You have my cooperation all right," growled a bearded little man. "There's nothing I wouldn't do to overthrow that damned fiend Wentel."

"And the rest of you?" Kent leaned forward, his burning eyes raking the faces of the men before him.

They gave their affirmatives almost to a man.

"I'm with you!"

"Count me in!"

"I'm your man!"

"I have to die some day—might as well make it fighting Wentel!"

"Good!" exclaimed Kent. "Now, as you know, the government has ceased to mine the more precious elements in favor of manufacturing them by the transmutation process. The only metals mined today are the more accessible ones, such as iron, copper, lead, and zinc. From these the government derives transmuted ones which are used in almost everything requiring metal parts. But what concerns us most are the weapons. The fact that government weapons are made of transmuted metals is going to win our revolution!"

"WHAT DO you mean?" inquired one of the men.

"Explain that!" added another.

"I will," replied Kent. "Here—look at this!" He pointed to a small box on the table beside him.

The men craned forward to peer at

It. The box was made of metal. From one side projected a cone of some dull black material, and on the top were three rods of glass wrapped with wire. There were switches on the box. Wires lead from it to a small generator on the floor.

"I'll give you a demonstration of what it can do." Kent held up a watch. "This was made from gold produced by the government transmutation laboratories. Now pay careful attention."

Kent placed the watch upon the table. Then he picked up the box and pointed the cone at the watch. He turned one of the switches on the box, and so suddenly that it was startling, the color of the watch began to change!

There was no light, no sound from that box—nothing. But the smooth yellow surface of the watch swiftly began to darken. In the space of a few seconds its yellow color was entirely gone, leaving it a dull grey!

"Look at it!" commanded Kent, handing the watch to one of the men.

The man looked at it—and let out an oath of astonishment. With a dazed expression on his face, he turned it over to his eager companions. "It's lead!" he muttered.

Cries of amazement followed his words. The others were passing the watch from hand to hand, and each reached the same decision—lead!

"Remember," said Kent softly, "government weapons are made of transmuted metals, and this watch was made of lead transmuted into gold..." He looked at the men one by one, and the devil-grin was on his lips.

And they understood! Only the fear of revelation kept them from shouting. But the elation they felt clearly showed in their shining eyes and the grim set of their faces.

"We're your men for sure now," the

little man with the beard said huskily. "Tell us what we're supposed to do—and nothing but death will stop us from doing it!"

Kent began to talk. He talked with a force and emotion that reached out and held the men before him.

"From what I've been able to learn thus far, the nations of Europe are exhausted from the last great war which took place three years ago—a sequel to the second world war: They are nearly devoid of manpower and weapons. They are so weak that a great, well-armed force could invade and subdue them easily.

"And this is what Wentel intends to do! Will we stand by and see the whole world subjected to his hateful rule? Or will we fight to smash him down, not only here in the America we love, but in Europe also?

"He *must* be smashed! The future of civilization demands that!

**"BUT HE MUST** be smashed in both places at once!

"We must strike at him here and in Europe at the same time. To strike at him first in Europe would warn him of the danger impending here. Or to strike at him here first means that his invading forces will be returned from Europe to combat us.

"With this device as a weapon, and with nearly three-fourths of Wentel's army in Europe we cannot lose! But we must have an army of our own. The people of America must know of what is going to take place. The people must know that they have a chance to live under the banner of liberty and independence once again.

"That will be your task. I am depending upon you men to spread the news of our cause. And I am depending upon you also to conquer Wentel!"

The men said nothing. Their tight

lips and clenched fists were answers more eloquent than words.

"Now," resumed Kent, "plans of this device must be drawn up and circulated around to men who will be able to build them. We must have thousands of these in as short a space of time as possible. Wentel's European forces are getting under way. We must beat them to the draw!"

"I need not impress you with the urgency of this matter. I know that your hate for Wentel will do the rest.

"For the present we will confine our activities to enlarging our own forces, and to making enough devices like this to supply an army. Now go. Remember that Wentel must be conquered. The happiness of your children and your children's children rests on that. Everything you do from now on will be a step to what we all want—liberty!"

One by one the men wrung Kent's hand. They departed as they had come—like silent ghosts into the night.

For a long time Kent remained in the cellar. He sat on the table, his elbow resting on a corner of the black box, his chin cupped in his hand. He was staring into nothingness, and there was a mingled expression of mockery and perplexity on his sharp, keen face.

Those men had been fooled—deluded into thinking that he, Kent Norton, was to be their savior. They believed that he intended to conquer Wentel with no thought for his own ambitions. The bright light of freedom had blinded them to his own aspirations.

Here was the beginning of his path to glory. The power he had always wanted was within his grasp. His old ambition was to be achieved—master of the world!

Kent laughed bitterly. But *who* was he fooling? Himself, or those hopeful

men? Was he being a hypocrite in arousing them against Wentel so that he could take Wentel's place? Or did he really intend to give them their freedom with no thought for himself? Was he losing the poignancy of his ambitions? Was he to take a detour in his path to glory?

**T**WO MONTHS of the most breathless activity followed that eventful cellar meeting. Kent established a new and larger headquarters in a small Illinois town. He did not dare to continue his activities in Fred's home for fear of exposing them to the danger of spies.

Plans hastily drawn up by Kent, were copied and widely circulated. Men who had hardly any knowledge of engineering were only too eager to help in making the vibrator-rays, as Kent had named his device. But they were crudely efficient in everything they did. Before long thousands of the vibrator-rays were in existence.

Kent held more and more meetings as the number of his revolutionaries increased. His solitary frame dwelling hummed with activity. Men came and went at all hours of the day and night.

Anti-Wentel propaganda was being widely distributed throughout America. Growing numbers of people were becoming aware of the Cause. Enthusiasm and hope were sweeping across the downtrodden nation like a tidal wave.

Kent was more and more surprised at the eagerness of his cohorts to help. No order he gave was too difficult or too fantastic for them to execute. They were always ready with helpful suggestions, and more than one man was singled out by Kent because of his intelligence and leadership abilities. Their ardor for the Cause, and their hate for Wentel were swinging across

a movement that should otherwise have been impossibility.

On the day that Wentel's armies left for Europe, Kent held a great meeting of his chiefs. The men knew that something important was to transpire, and an undercurrent of tenseness held them all.

"The time has come!" announced Kent. "Wentel's forces are already on their way to invade Europe. We are ready to strike our first and final blow for freedom!

"Through representatives, the various nations in Europe have been appraised of the situation and are ready to defend themselves. Their situation would be a hopeless one were it not for the plans for vibrator-rays we have distributed among them. In their weakened condition they would have succumbed easily.

"But as it is, they have been warned and are ready. Wentel's army of gold-hungry bandits will find a warm reception awaiting them!

"Wentel knows of the Cause. That cannot be doubted since our men have discovered and questioned many of his spies. But it is too late for him to do anything. Our people are ready. The greatest part of his army has already left on their mission of supposed conquest.

"But Wentel is still sure of himself, for he believes that we are weaponless rabble, that we will rise up to fight him with our bare fists. He is mistaken! With our vibrator-rays to pave the way, sharp knives and heavy bars will put us on an equal footing with the best-armed soldier he has!" Kent paused as if for emphasis, but in reality he was marshalling straying thoughts. He was seeing a bright and golden path before him—and it was fast dimming. His face, gaunt and lined from unceasing labor,

turned hard.

"OUR MEN are ready and waiting in every important city in America," he continued, a note of harshness in his voice. "In one great, concerted movement we will strike! Ives, are the broadcasters ready? Then give the signal to begin. Alright, men, now go and fight for your liberty! Throw off the chains with which Wentel has bound you!"

A cheer rose in the room, thundering, deafening in its volume. The men milled around excitedly. They stayed long enough to shake Kent's hand, and then they swiftly left. Kent remained alone in that empty room, trying mentally to grasp something that was fleeing from his hold.

Outside a growing murmur rose, swelled, and became a roar. Voices were raised in a song that had not been sung for a long, long time, a heart-stirring song of glories nearly forgotten. Pounding feet were keeping time to that song.

*"...sweet land of liberty..."*

Men—thousands of men—were singing that song. All over America men were singing that song. And listening to his armies moving away and singing, Kent found that the thing he was trying to grasp was gone forever.

Kent leaned over the shoulder of the man operating the controls of the huge television set. Colored lights were shifting, racing across the screen. Then, they steadied, and a picture of movement and sound took form.

Huge rocket planes were roaring above a great city. Small, black shapes were dropping from those planes. Where they fell was a roar of sound and a flare of bright light. Large areas of that city were in flaming ruins.

"Paris," muttered Kent as he saw



the tower of metal framework which arose in that city.

Then the scene changed as the operator manipulated controls. The people in the streets of that city could be seen. They were pointing big metal boxes at the planes in the sky. There were queer, cone-like fixtures on the fronts of those boxes. Nothing appeared to issue from them, but when they pointed at a plane something happened.

The plane would fall apart as though the metal of which it was composed had softened. Then those planes would explode like a huge bomb.

Again the scene changed, and more planes were seen above another great city. There were men in the streets of this city also, pointing big, metal boxes at the planes in the sky. And the planes here, too, were falling apart and exploding.

Whatever the scene, whatever the city, planes were falling and exploding. Planes were falling and exploding all over Europe.

Kent moved to another screen. Here was another city, and there were people in the streets. There were thousands of people, and most of them were carrying small, metal boxes that had cones in front. They were pointing those boxes at an army of men in bright, gaudy uniforms. And the rifles those men held were bursting!

In other cities were armored tanks and trucks upon which were mounted large cannons. A group of men who wore no gaudy uniforms were pointing their boxes at the oncoming tanks and the booming cannons.

**T**HE TANKS gave a muffled groan and ceased to move. Some portions of them began to fall away. They sank into themselves as if suddenly turned to mud.

The cannons were booming, but here and there a cannon would fly to pieces.

There were planes in the sky, and whenever a box pointed at one, that plane would shed its wings and vanish in a flash of light.

All over America men were pointing boxes, and all over America guns and planes were coming apart. Men in gaudy uniforms were being overwhelmed by a sea of men who had no uniforms. There was action all over the continent.

"It's magic the way those guns come apart," whispered little, bearded Ives. "Magic!"

"Not magic, Ives," answered Kent. "Science. Do you remember what I did with that watch? It was made of transmuted gold, Ives, and it turned to lead when I pointed the vibrator-ray at it. Those planes, those tanks and cannon are all made of transmuted metals, Ives. When my vibrator-ray hits them they change into whatever they were before they were transmuted—copper, lead, or tin."

"But how?" asked Ives, screwing up his gnome-like face. "Those boxes don't seem to do anything."

"Vibrations, Ives. The boxes emit a ray of sound waves of very high frequency. A transmuted metal is unstable as compared with the real article. By giving the atoms of such a metal a good shaking up with vibrations, the electrons which have been added are thrown off, and the electrons which have been taken away are added. Thus, the transmuted metal reverts to its former state.

"It's taking place before you in those screens now, Ives. Cannons are turning into lead or copper, planes to tin, and guns to lead, or whatever they were before being transmuted."

"It's still magic," insisted Ives.

Through the sound which filled the room penetrated a shrill, excited voice.

"Flash! Wentel's forces in Europe have been completely routed. Reports from Berlin, Paris, and Rome say that no trace of enemy planes remain in the sky. The few invaders who have escaped destruction from the Norton rays are returning to America. Europe is hailing Kent Norton as its savior!"

Another voice added to the din.

"Flash! Entire east and west coast in hands of revolutionists. The armies of liberty and independence are rapidly pushing their way inward through the country with New York as a hub. Wentel's stronghold is the only place which thus far has been able to resist subjugation. However, bombing planes, and more men and weapons are being brought up. It is only a matter of minutes until it falls..."

More reports came flowing in. Kent was listening with glowing eyes when someone touched his arm.

"Sir, there's a man outside who wants to see you at once. He says that it's urgent!"

"I'll see him," said Kent. He left the room and made his way to the entrance hall. There, surrounded by a group of his men, he found Fred Satterly. He had not seen him for weeks.

**K**ENT TOLD his men, "Let him go, boys. He's a friend of mine."

"Kent!" gasped Fred. "They're going to bomb Wentel's fortress. They mustn't!"

Kent gripped the old man's arm. "What do you mean?"

"Wentel's got...Doris in there!"

"What!"

"Yes. One of his damned beauty scouts kidnaped her about a week ago. I tried to contact you, but your men told me that you were busy. Kent, you've got to save her!"

Kent stood as though stunned. Doris of the sharp, grey eyes and the chestnut hair—kidnaped for Wentel's harem! He had never realized how much she meant to him before. But now—Why, the world would be an empty place, victory a dead thing, if she were not at his side.

Kent snapped into action. "Ives, the fastest car we've got! Hurry, man, hurry! Kratski, have the broadcasters announce that all bombers are to leave the Wentel fortress unmolested! Fred, come on!"

Wentel's castle, a small walled city, was a scene of furious action. Cries and shouts and the booming of weapons filled the air. An angry mob that had forgotten that it was fighting merely for liberty was howling for Wentel's blood. The ground about the castle was so thickly packed with human figures that it was almost impossible to get through.

The main gate had been battered open, and the courtyard within was as thickly packed as outside. Some of the smaller buildings had already been broken into, but the larger ones were resisting invasion.

Kent had to identify himself before the mob would let him through. And when he did identify himself he was ushered into the courtyard with a speed that left him dizzy.

There were shouts of "Norton!" "Kent Norton!" "Our liberator!" "Three cheers for Kent Norton!"

In the courtyard Kent found things at an impasse. The ground underfoot was strewn with bodies in gaudy uniforms. Men were pushing and shoving in their anger and impatience. They could not get into the main building, and Wentel and his men could not get out.

"We can't get in!" several men complained.

"How do you expect to get in?" roared Kent. "By blowing on the walls? Get bombs, explosives, anything!"

Bombs and explosives were quickly forthcoming. Kent directed several men to chip out the mortar between the stones on one side of the building. Sticks of powder ransacked from an exploded arsenal were wedged in between the stones. Kent lighted the fuses.

"Get under cover!" he commanded.

**T**HERE WAS a loud boom and pieces of stone filled the air. The breach thus made was enlarged by succeeding charges. Soon a large hole was opened in the wall. Followed by his yelling cohorts, Kent plunged into the gap.

Soldiers in gaudy uniforms began running away from the vengeful men who streamed in through that hole. They did some half-hearted shooting, but otherwise ran as fast as they could.

Kent was a lean, dirt-smeared spectre as he ran through the building, opening doors and looking into rooms. His lips were thinned out to a mere gash, and fire was in his eyes. A group of self-elected guards followed him everywhere.

By this time the building was echoing to the shouts of the mob. Men and women ran in all directions, yelling, half-crazed with joy. When they found some soldiers in gaudy uniforms they paused a while. The uniforms were no longer gaudy when they resumed their grisly search.

Kent was to remember one particular incident in the invasion of the building. It was to remain as an awful memory as long as he lived. As he ran breathless and feverish through the building, the mob hard on his heels, he came upon a big, fat man with

grey hair. The man was frantically trying to open a window and jump to the ground below. There was a look of insane terror upon his face.

The mob screamed in hellish glee at sight of that man. "Wentel!" "There's that damned Wentel!" "Kill him!" "Tear him to pieces!"

Kent did not like to remember what happened after that.

And then Kent found what he was looking for. The odor of perfume drew him to one wing of the building. He plunged into a series of rooms which were distinctly feminine in nature. In one of the last rooms he found Doris.

She was huddled in the midst of a group of terrified, half-clad girls who screamed in fear as Kent and his wild-eyed men rushed in. Doris recognized Kent in spite of the grime and blood with which he was covered. Sobbing and laughing with joy and relief, she rushed into his arms.

Kent held her hard for a long moment, feeling not at all surprised at himself and his emotions. This was somehow natural. Dimly, he became aware of shouting voices.

"Norton!" "Kent Norton!" "Three cheers for Kent Norton!"

**I**T WAS MONTHS before things in the United States of America had settled down, and more months passed before the affairs of the nation were drawn up into some semblance of order. The wheels of industry had resumed motion. Abandoned farmlands were being replanted, and the crops of farmlands which had not been abandoned were being reaped. The financial system was slowly being built up on a new foundation.

Behind every one of the movements was the lean, dynamic figure of Kent Norton. As leader of the revolution,

the people looked upon him to lead them in resuming their new life. They had in fact, become dependent upon him for everything they did.

Kent no longer thirsted for power. He had seen what power in the hands of one man could do. He had seen people awed and cowed by that power, their very lives made miserable. And it had left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He had found a different kind of power, a very satisfying kind of power. It was the power of men's respect and admiration, and the comfort of a woman's love.

In a certain frame building, the white paint of which had darkened from years of neglect, Kent held what he hoped would be a final meeting. All of the men who had untiringly served him during the past months were present.

"America is back on its feet," he said. "With a little care and caution it will stay on its feet. Right now a president should be elected who can be depended upon to keep the wheels of progress in motion. The minor offices can be filled in later.

"Element transmutation is proving to be more of a blessing than a curse. Metals which were otherwise very rare and expensive are now being produced cheaply. Science will make great advances with large supplies of the precious elements it needs for experimentation purposes. It is even hoped that new metals can be produced by the process. The formula, by my demand, should be given to the world.

"**A**ND NOW that everything else has been said and done, I'll ask your leave. You men are now on your own. I'm sure that you'll be able to adjust future matters to your own satisfaction. As for me...

well... I'm leaving on a honeymoon as soon as I can."

One of the men rose to his feet. He looked around impressively at his companions—who suddenly appeared very expectant—and then at Kent. He straightened himself up, and in a purposeful tone, began to speak.

"As you say, everything has been said and done, but some of the more important matters seem to have been overlooked, especially this matter of a president. None of us men feel that we are capable of filling such an important office. Besides, we've been taking orders from you so long that it would seem unnatural to give our own.

"In the eyes of the people of America, you are their champion. They would be disappointed to learn that the presidency had been given to someone other than yourself. So in view of this fact..."

In a flash of realization, Kent knew what was coming. A great surge of warmth started somewhere in his breast and spread tingling throughout his body. Before the moisture which clouded his eyes appeared again that wide and bright and golden path to glory—and as he looked it began to fade, change. Another path was taking its place. It was smaller and not so golden, but it was even brighter than the other had been.

He now knew many of the secrets that had been hidden from mankind since the beginning of time, and he realized how groundless were the multitudinous fears of men. Fear of dying—aye, even the fear of living; the fear of tomorrow and what tomorrow may bring. He smiled in his new-found strength and strode on up the path.

THE END





# YOUR FUNERAL IS WAITING

By Rog Phillips

**It was as daring an experiment as any man ever attempted, with the stakes high and disaster the price of a failure. And the reward in case of success? Eternal disgrace**

**T**HE SHARP sound of a car door slamming came from outside. A man with iron gray hair jumped to his feet, walked swiftly around two medical examination tables without a single glance at the rigid form lying on one of them, and threw open a door.

A youthful figure hurrying up the stairs was carrying the lax form of an old man dressed only in a hospital gown.

"You got him all right!" the older man exclaimed in relief. "Quick. Onto the table. There's not a second to lose. Not only do we have to complete the transfer, but we have to get the corpse back to the hospital before its absence is discovered."

His eyes softened as they came to

rest on the tired old face, etched with its evidence of long suffering, with dark eyelids covering deeply sunken eyes.

As the younger man laid the unconscious form on the vacant table the older felt anxiously for a pulse. Finding it, he nodded his satisfaction.

He stepped back, his eyes darting from the unconscious man to the rigid form on the other table, comparing details. The two figures were very much alike. The rigid one might have been a statue of the unconscious man, sculptured when he was twenty years younger and in good health.

The young man was fastening broad heavy leather straps across the chest and around the legs and arms of the unconscious man. The straps were an-

chored firmly into the table.

He finished and did the same to the other figure. Then he adjusted a bulbous hollow dome somewhat similar to the dryer in a beauty parlor over the head of each figure, fastening it into place with clamps. He took great pains to make sure of the adjustment of the hoods to the scalps.

When he stepped back, satisfied, the older man stepped in and inspected everything that had been done.

"Everything's O.K.," he said.

He retreated slowly from the two tables, staring intently at the two motionless, strapped-down figures.

The younger man, his eyes on the older, went over to an instrument panel. Thick cables from the hoods over the two figures on the tables led into this panel.

The older man glanced his way, nodded tensely.

The young man's hand went to the panel. A finger straightened, touching a small red button. After the briefest of pauses it pushed against the button.

**T**HERE WAS a faint brief hum from the cabinet behind the panel. A fraction of a second later a soulless, inarticulate moan escaped the blue lips of the unconscious old man. His arms and legs jerked sickeningly. His body heaved up against the heavy straps across his chest. It was a general convulsive jerking. Then he lay still.

The two men paid no more attention to the figure of the old man. Their eyes stared expectantly at the rigid form on the other table.

For an almost eternal moment it remained rigid. Suddenly a foot twisted jerkily to one side and back again.

There was no further movement for several minutes. The two men waited, their eyes watching. Without warn-

ing, one of the hands moved, fingers clenching and unclenching slowly, experimentally.

The older man looked at the younger, smiling slowly. The younger man returned the smile and nodded.

"Are you awake now, Dr. Alliston?" the older man said slowly.

The fingers that had been slowly unclenching jerked at the sound, then slowly relaxed.

"Take the hoods off," the older man ordered. "It's accomplished. He heard me. He'll be all right."

The younger man unclamped the hoods, lifting them out of the way on their adjustable frames.

"I'll have to get *this* back," he said, unstrapping the lax figure of the old man in the hospital gown.

"In a moment," the older man said. "I want Alliston to see it first. We had that experience. And I doubt if he'd ever really believe it unless he sees it."

The lips of the other figure opened, trembling on an attempt to speak. A raspy sound came from the open lips. The two men stared at them, excitement in their eyes.

"Ssseesss wh't," the words came. The eyes popped open and stared at the ceiling, then began roaming.

They came to rest on the older man, seemed to study him without recognition. Suddenly they widened in surprise.

"Dr. Morris!" the lips whispered, incredulous.

"Yes, Dr. Alliston," the older man said. "How do you feel?"

"Why..." Dr. Alliston seemed to explore his feelings. "All right, I guess. But these straps—and the last I remember I was—" He had slowly turned his head until his eyes came to rest on the figure on the other table. "What's that! Why, it looks

like—" He didn't complete the thought, shying away from it.

"What you're thinking is correct, Dr. Alliston," Dr. Morris said with slow emphasis. "That figure on the other table was, until a few minutes ago, your residence, your body. Now you are housed in a more permanent domicile. A robot body. A brain made of a colloid plastic that will last forever. And your body that you see there—is dead."

**T**HE ROOM was in darkness except for the moonlight that filtered in through the half-raised Venetian blinds at the open window, painting a latticework of light and shadow on the glistening wall and across the bed. The sheet and blanket on the bed were turned down clumsily, the pillow mussed. The one door to the room was ajar an inch or two. Somewhere beyond it came the faint sound of a woman's voice, cheery in tone, muffled.

Abruptly the lattice pattern of moonlight revealed the movement of something solid outside the window. A figure. It stooped, paused, then came through the open lower half of the window.

Its movements were urgent but silent. Once in the room it leaned out, then half dragged, half lifted an inert form through. Naked emaciated legs, a white hospital gown, a slack face and sparse white hair were revealed by the moonlight.

Suddenly sharp heels sounded, coming closer from beyond the door. The intruder holding the inert, half-dressed form sped across the room to the bed, dropped his burden, and darted back toward the open window.

The door opened. A white arm flashed briefly in the moonlight, reaching for the wall switch. The ceiling light came on, bathing the room

abruptly in glaring light, revealing the figure at the window.

The head, concealed by a pulled-down hat, turned just far enough for dark eyes to observe the nurse. As she screamed shrilly the intruder slipped through the window, was framed there on the platform of the fire escape for an instant, then was gone.

"Help!" the nurse screamed for the third time. She caught her breath audibly, seeming to get a grip on her nerves.

Alarm and concern on her young face, she hurried to the bed. The old man was sprawled in the same position in which he had been dropped, his head at a sharp angle, eyes open and staring, jaw hanging slack.

Running footsteps converged toward the open door. Two men in the white frocks of internes paused in the doorway, their eyes darting about in a hasty survey of the room.

"What's wrong, Miss Larson?" one of them asked.

The nurse's horrified eyes lifted from the figure on the bed.

"There was a man," her voice shrilled hysterically. "He went out the window." Her eyes went back to the figure on the bed. "He's dead," she said thinly. "Murdered, I think!"

**I**T WAS an hour later. A man with a camera was taking angle shots of the body on the bed, flashbulbs flickering their incandescence.

The nurse, her face pale and eyes wide with numb shock, sat stiffly erect in a chair against one wall. Two men were standing near her, talking earnestly.

"I tell you, Mr. Corcoran," Dr. Friend said emphatically, "there was absolutely no excuse for murder—if that's what it was. Alliston had less than twenty-four hours to live!"

"Maybe somebody didn't know that," Corcoran said. "I didn't."

"Everyone knew it," Dr. Friend said doggedly. "It was on the front pages of all the newspapers day before yesterday. He was one of the country's most outstanding scientists."

"Yeah..." Corcoran said. "Come to think of it I did read about it. Cancer. In a coma. Less than forty-eight hours left to live."

"That's right," Dr. Friend said. "That's why I don't see how it can be murder in spite of what Miss Larson says."

"You through there, Fred?" Corcoran asked the police photographer. "All right, Dr. Friend, you can examine the body now. Look for any kind of wound that might have caused death."

As the doctor bent over the body, Corcoran fixed his eyes on the nurse.

"Tell me again what happened," he said kindly. "Maybe you can think of something you forgot the other two times."

"There's nothing I forgot," she said, looking up at him pleadingly, her lip trembling.

"Tell me anyway," he said.

"I came into the room and turned on the light," Miss Larson said quickly. "I wasn't expecting anything. Dr. Alliston was in coma. I was merely checking to see if he was still alive. As I opened the door I thought I heard the bed creak. It made me excited, thinking he might have recovered consciousness. I switched on the light. It was then I saw the figure of a man at the window. He was still inside. He wore a dark suit, dark brown I think, with a dark felt hat pulled down over his face—"

"Come here and look at this, Corcoran!" Dr. Friend said sharply.

Corcoran turned and went to the bed. The nurse stood up slowly and

followed Corcoran apprehensively.

Dr. Friend was looking up at them, but his fingers were pushing against a place on the dead man's chest that gave unnaturally under his pressure.

"Broken ribs here," he said. "I'm quite sure they couldn't have been broken before. Not only that—" He straightened up. "They were broken either after death or at the moment of death. Look closely at the skin there. It's definitely bruised, but there's no darkening of the skin as there would be in live flesh, caused by the collection of blood corpuscles."

"Could that have caused death?" Corcoran asked, bending down to look closely.

"Definitely not!" Dr. Friend said. "And there's not a wound on him other than that."

JANUARY STEVENS paused idly, fished a nickel out of his pocket, and bought a newspaper from the shabbily dressed old man. He opened it up as he continued walking toward his car, parked at the curb.

The headlines read: MYSTERY IN DEATH OF SCIENTIST.

He slowed down as he read underneath.

"Dr. Alliston, the famed physicist," it read, "was found dead in his bed at the hospital at two o'clock this morning under suspicious circumstances...."

Jan read on until he came to the statement, "The mystery is further heightened by the finding that the cortical layer of his brain was coagulated to a depth of less than a hundredth of an inch as though it had been cooked."

When he read this his eyes widened in startled surprise. He snapped the newspaper closed and looked around him. His eyes settled on the corner drugstore. Doubling the newspaper un-

der his arm, he hurried into the drugstore. In a moment he was in a telephone booth, dialing a number.

"Hello, Paula," he said hastily.

"January!" Her voice exploded in relief over the phone. "I've been trying to get you everywhere. It's happened!"

"Yes, I know," Jan said. "I just read it in the newspaper. Is your father around?"

"Yes," Paula said. "I'll call him."

"No, wait," Jan said. "I'll be right out."

He dropped the receiver on the hook and left the drugstore. He didn't notice the man he brushed past on his way to his car, nor did he look back as he pulled away and see that man hurry to the curb and flag down a cruising taxi.

January paused just inside the doorway of the study, his fingers twined in Paula's, staring into the grim eyes of Dr. Morris. Dr. Morris returned his stare for a moment, then nodded his head.

"They've finally begun," he said, his voice angry and bitter.

"I guess it was inevitable," Jan said tiredly. "They'd want company. More of their own kind."

He dropped his clutch on Paula's fingers and flung himself angrily into a chair.

"This means we've got to make the whole thing public," he said bitterly. "We'll have to go to the authorities. They won't believe us at first, but we'll be able to prove everything."

"Are you sure that's the right thing to do, January?" Dr. Morris asked slowly. "After all, Alliston was going to die in a few more hours anyway. This way his mind's preserved. For all practical purposes he's still alive, only now with a body that can be renewed when it wears out, while his

new brain will live for centuries, enabling his mind to continue its development unhampered by old age or illness."

"But you and I know that that isn't so!" Jan said. "We know that it isn't his mind, but a dynarecording of his mind. No more the original than the voice of a singer coming from a phonograph record is the original. He was *killed* in that transfer. And they don't know that. They believe they're the actual minds of you and me, lifted from our living brains and transplanted in those colloidal dielectric brains."

"If we could get to them, find them," Dr. Morris said, "we could show them how to change the circuit so that they don't kill when they make a mental dyna-recording."

"We've tried everything," Jan groaned. "We've spent hundreds of dollars advertising for them to come forward. They ignore it, if they ever see it."

"Maybe we should leave them alone, January," Dr. Morris said. "They will be doing the world a great service by saving the greatest scientific minds of this age. And if this present case is any indication, they will be very careful not to take any of them until almost the last moment before death."

"That isn't the way I see it happening," Jan said. "I doubt if any human being could suddenly find himself in a robot body, made of stainless steel bones, plastic muscles as smooth and efficient as a machine, wire nerves, and a colloid, non-living brain, and continue to regard himself as one of the human race. He'd still be human in his mental makeup, and it's human to want more of your own kind around you. And what I'm really afraid of is that it's also human to think your kind a little better and more important than any other kind of person."

"You mean they'll turn against the



race of the living?" Dr. Morris exclaimed with an incredulous smile. "No, I doubt that. A band of robots battling the human race, in a war against living people who alone can develop the minds they would have to have to increase their own numbers?"

"Just the same," Jan said doggedly, "if they did they'd be hard to beat. Time would be on their side. And do you realize that we three are the only ones that know of their existence? I don't like it. I think we should tell the authorities. The paper said a man from the homicide department of the police, a Mr. Corcoran, is in charge of the case. I think I should call him and at least tell him what we know."

"Maybe you're right, Jan," Dr. Morris said, frowning. "Go ahead. Let's see what comes of it, anyway."

Jan leaped to his feet, smiled nervously at Paula, who was still standing in the doorway, and went to the phone on Dr. Morris' desk.

He lifted the receiver. As his finger reached for the dial there was a startled gasp from Paula. Jan glanced up.

A man was standing in the doorway, a gun in his hand.

"Put that phone down, January," the intruder said, taking a step into the room.

Paula, the back of her hand against her mouth, was staring from the intruder to Jan and back again, her eyes wide.

"Yes," the intruder said, interpreting her look. "I'm also January Stevens. I'm the dyna-transcript mental double. I rather thought that unfortunate blunder last night would come to your attention. Now I'm going to have to do what I had hoped would never be necessary."

"Kill us?" Jan asked.

"Just take you out of circulation. Dr. Morris—the robot Dr. Morris—and I have acquired a very beautiful country estate for our headquarters. You can be very comfortable there for the present. But let me warn you that if you don't come along peaceably and if you try to get away I'll be forced to shoot. I can't afford to risk the existence of the future race of mankind because of your quite natural feelings on the subject."

JANUARY and Paula stood looking out the large picture window at the rolling landscape, a seemingly unplanned brook wandering lazily along a channel cut in the lawn, with tall white birches on either side.

Dr. Morris, a huge black cigar stuck in his mouth, paced the deep oriental rug, a frown of impatience and frustration on his lean face.

"They can't keep us here forever," he said to Jan and Paula's backs. "Sooner or later they'll have to let us go—if we don't find some way to escape first."

"It's nice here, dad," Paula said without turning. "I only hope they will let us go down to that brook. I'd like to take off my shoes and stockings and wiggle my toes in the mud at the bottom."

"That might be arranged," the voice of the robot January said.

Dr. Morris whirled angrily in the direction of the sound, while Jan and Paula turned slowly. The robot January stood framed in the doorway of the room, a cigarette in one hand. As they stared he lifted the cigarette to his lips and inhaled deeply.

"What's this?" Dr. Morris barked incredulously. "Smoking? But why? You're a machine. You can't get any pleasure out of it."

"Not only that," Jan spoke up, looking keenly at the robot, "I didn't

build any bellows into your body when I made it."

"Ah, but Jan," the robot January said, exhaling twin streams of smoke through his nostrils, "this is not the body you built. I built this one myself. And, believe me, I get a great deal of satisfaction out of smoking. I can even eat and drink in this body, and my senses of taste and smell are far keener than yours. Of course, I can't digest the food I eat. I have no need to, since the energy I consume comes from storage batteries." He smiled and went over to an ashtray where he flicked the ash off his cigarette. "Until the robot Dr. Morris came into existence and found me it hadn't occurred to me to create others of my kind. During those years while I was alone I spent my time constructing a body really worthy of the infinite capacity of my mind to develop."

"How did you lift your brain out of the old body by yourself?" Jan asked.

"That," the robot January said, "is a secret I won't discuss."

He ground out the cigarette, his expression becoming serious.

"But there's no point in showing off," he said. "As I came in you were discussing how long you would be held here against your will. The reason you were brought here was that you were going to do something hasty. You were going to call the police and make public your discovery of the process of mental dyna-transcription which produces a mind in a colloidal mass identical in every way with the mind of the living person. You've been reaching some wrong conclusions about the philosophical implications of that process of reproduction."

"I DON'T think so," Jan said firmly. "It stands to reason that if I'm the same before and after you

are created you aren't me, and if by the same process I die in the operation of transcription, that still doesn't make you me."

"That *sounds* irrefutable," the robot January said, lighting another cigarette absently while his eyes remained fixed on Jan. "Let me give you an example that might cast a different light on the problem."

"Suppose I were to build another robot body exactly like this one in every respect. So much so that a detailed examination could detect no difference. Then suppose I were to place my head under the transfer hood and throw a switch that would create a mind, an electronic matrix of factual and functional memory, in that other robot body, exactly identical with mine at that moment of transfer."

"And suppose that this other robot and I were taken off the transfer tables and placed somewhere else so that we wouldn't have the clue of which table we were on to tell us which was the original and which the transcription. Suppose this were done in some way so that no one would know which was the original. Then there would be no way of possibly determining which was the original and which the dyna-transcript mind."

"In such a case the problem of continuity of identity would become more academic than practical, wouldn't it? In other words it would be meaningless."

The robot January smiled at the confusion on the faces of his listeners.

"The problem of death," he went on calmly, "would still be a personal one for each of me. It would be something to be avoided, personally. But so long as one of me existed I would continue to exist. Isn't that true?"

"No," Dr. Morris said calmly from behind his cigar. "From the instant

you started to think after there were two of you, each of you would tend to become different individuals. You would be identical up to the moment of schism, but not at any time after that. *You* would always remember that you were the one that came to in the room on the north side of the hall, while the other would always identify himself as the one who woke up in the room on the south side of the hall."

"An insignificant difference," the robot January said, "and it still can't resolve the problem of which of us *was the original.*"

"That's true," Dr. Morris said uncomfortably, clamping down on his cigar.

"**YOU SEE,**" the robot January said earnestly, "I'm trying to show you that you are wrong. If I can convince you that the process you, January, discovered, and you, Dr. Morris, rediscovered, actually enables the human mind to become immortal, preserving its continuity of identity, you will see that it's the greatest thing since the creation of the human mind itself, and will ensure immortality for every person alive!"

"Huh-uh," January said. "If I were to get shot through the heart right now I would die. You aren't me. By no stretch of the imagination could it be said that I continued to live—my mind, if you will—just because you continued to function. *You aren't me any more,* assuming that, for the sake of argument, you were at the moment you came into being."

"By the same token you aren't you either then," the robot January said triumphantly. "You have changed even more since our split into separate but identical minds than I have. So the January Stevens of three years ago

no longer exists anywhere. He is dead!"

"Was it you who murdered Professor Alliston?" Paula asked calmly.

"I'm glad you mentioned him," the robot January said. "I'm going to bring him in and introduce him. Did you know him before the transfer, Dr. Morris?"

"Yes," Dr. Morris said, taking out his cigar and fixing his eyes on its glowing end, his expression strained.

"Be back in a minute," the robot January said.

He left the room.

**T**HE MOMENT he was gone January rushed to the door and tried to open it. It was locked. He turned away from it, frustration and anger on his face.

He turned, placing his back against the door.

"Do you see what's going on?" he said tensely. "This is worse than any political ideology trying to make itself universally accepted. And far more subtle. You can see how easy it would be to make anyone believe it. And if it goes on until they have enough robots, they can take over the world!"

"We'll see whether Alliston believes it," Dr. Morris said.

There was grimness in his tone that made Jan look at him sharply. Paula ran the few steps to her father, looking at him with mute appeal in her eyes. Dr. Morris returned her look steadily, shaking his head almost imperceptibly.

Jan sensed this interplay. He opened his mouth to ask what it meant. Before he could speak the door at his back pushed against him. He stepped away, turning.

The man who entered would have made the homicide man Corcoran's hair rise. He was to all appearances the same man whose body had lain in

death in that hospital room.

There was an expression of interest and curiosity on his face as he entered the room. His eyes passed over Jan and went to Dr. Morris.

"Why, Dr. Morris!" he said happily, advancing with outstretched hands. "This is indeed a pleasure."

Dr. Morris took the proffered hands, his face beaming, but with a tortured light deep in the back of his eyes.

The robot Dr. Alliston turned his attention to Paula.

"And Paula!" he beamed. "You've grown up since I saw you last. More womanly now. It's becoming to you."

"Yes," Paula said, her face twisted into a tortured smile, tears coursing onto her cheeks.

The robot Dr. Alliston half turned to Jan.

"And this is your young man?" he said. Then he paused, his eyes switching from Jan to the robot January standing in the doorway. "Well, this is interesting!" he exclaimed.

The robot January stepped into the room, closing the door.

"This is the original Jan Stevens," he said, grinning. "Our minds are identical up to the point of departure of three years ago. He still can't accept the idea of my being actually him. What do you think of your transfer into the brain of a robot?"

"I think it's the most wonderful invention since the cotton gin," the robot Dr. Alliston said humorously. "The last I can remember of life in my body is sinking into a sea of torture, with excruciating pain that centered in my abdomen. I was longing for death, hoping that I would never wake up. Then, suddenly, I do wake up—in a body that can have no pain or ills. I learn that instead of being dead I'm saved from extinction and

can look forward to at least a few centuries of continued good health and mental development."

"BUT DR. ALLISTON!" January said. "Don't you realize that you aren't the real Dr. Alliston, but just a recording, a dyna-transcript, and that the mind of Dr. Alliston himself died during that transfer?"

"Nonsense," Dr. Alliston said unperturbed. "I remember being ill. I recognize my old friend Dr. Morris and," he turned and smiled at her, "his very beautiful daughter Paula. Can you say any more? The very atoms of your body are replaced by new ones at least once every eleven months. *They* aren't you. *You* are the mental force pattern, the matrix of memories and mental processes. But I see your trouble. You shrink from the idea. Your trouble is emotional rather than logical, and you're trying to give it a cloak of logic."

"I would say it's the other way around," Jan said thinly. "You are unable emotionally to accept the fact that you aren't Dr. Alliston, but merely a record of his mind, implanted in the colloidal brain of a robot. For you to accept that fact would be for you to admit consciously that you are not a human being, but a machine on a par with an automobile and a tape recorder; something you shy away from!"

"Ah! But you're wrong!" Professor Alliston said delightedly. "I do admit it. But you are essentially the same thing, except that the force pattern that is *you* is in a matrix of atoms arranged into what is known as living substance." He held up his hand as Jan started to interrupt. "You are going to bring up the soul? What is the soul unless it contains your mind, your thoughts? When you die,

since your brain is obviously left in the dead body if there is a soul, and I firmly believe there is, that mental matrix of your mind must become a part of it. It must either be lifted out of your brain and transplanted into the soul, as was done in my case, you know, or it must be a duplicate of that matrix of the mind residing in your brain at present, as is the case with you and your robot double, Mr. Stevens." He beamed delightedly at Jan. "You see," he said softly, "logic is against you." He turned to Dr. Morris. "Am I not right, doctor?"

"It would almost seem so, Dr. Alliston," Dr. Morris said, puffing on his cigar, looking up at the ceiling.

**HIS EYES** darted suddenly to the robot January.

"How many, er, recruits do you have now, Mr. Stevens?" he asked.

"Just three of us so far," the robot January said. "Myself, Dr. Alliston, and your counterpart, Dr. Morris. He doesn't wish to come in here for some reason. Perhaps he doesn't want the emotional shock of seeing you."

"Only three of you?" Dr. Morris said, surprised. "Then how do you propose to keep us from escaping? By keeping us locked up in one room? That's too bad. Jan and Paula were just wishing they could take a walk on the grounds by that brook we can see from the window. It's a shame."

"They can if they wish," the robot January said. "This old mansion is in the middle of a quarter section of land. There's a broad fenced-in strip running all around the place that contains dogs capable of killing anyone who crosses. Rather melodramatic, but—effective. So long as they fully realize that to climb that fence and attempt to escape will be tantamount to suicide they are at liberty to go out on the grounds."

Dr. Morris glanced swiftly at Paula, then smiled casually at Jan.

"Suppose you two go out for a walk along the brook then," he said. "I have a lot I want to talk about with my old friend Dr. Alliston."

"I'll show you the way out," the robot January said quickly. "And also see that you do go out, since I'm not ready to trust you yet. Would you like me to leave you two alone?" He asked Dr. Morris.

"Oh, no," Dr. Morris said blithely. "In fact, I want you here."

Paula went to her father. Her lip trembled momentarily as she put her arms around him. He looked into her eyes with grave tenderness, then kissed her on the cheek.

She turned away abruptly, head down, her hand against her eye as though brushing away a tear, and hurried through the door the robot January was holding open.

"After you, January," the robot January said.

In the hall he led the way to the front door and opened it. They passed him onto the porch.

"A word of caution," the robot January said.

They turned and looked at him.

"You are right—and I'm right, January," the robot said gravely. "What it boils down to is that I exist, with a desire to survive, and have companions similar to myself, just as you do. I give you my word, and it is the same as your word, but with the added determination given by the knowledge that I am not of the same race as you any more, that if you do try to escape and you succeed, I will kill Dr. Morris, slowly and with torture."

"Don't worry," Jan said contemptuously. "You should know me well enough to know that I wouldn't run away and leave Paula's father. If and



when I escape it will be all three of us." He turned. "Come on, Paula," he said, taking her arm.

The robot January watched them descend the steps, then slowly closed the door.

"**WE** MAY as well enjoy our outing," Jan said with forced cheerfulness, glancing at Paula.

They were sitting near each other on the bank of the stream. Paula was staring broodily into the dark still surface of the brook, which widened at this point, forming a still pool.

Paula lifted her eyes, smiled feebly, then dropped them to stare into the pool again.

"Come on, Paula," Jan persisted gently, "cheer up."

When she didn't respond he studied her, puzzled.

"What is it, Paula?" he asked finally. "This isn't like you. Something's on your mind that I don't know about. Come to think of it, something passed between you and your father in there. That's what's troubling you. How about telling me what it is?"

Paula continued to stare into the pool for another minute while Jan waited. Finally she looked up at him.

"I'm not a very good actress, am I?" she said. "Yes, there is something, but I promised Dad not to talk, so..."

"Hnnn!" Jan said. "So that's it! He has some scheme to free us." He stood up resolutely. "I'm going back in there."

"No!" Paula said sharply, looking up in alarm. "You—you musn't."

"I don't like this," Jan said uneasily. "Either you tell me or I'm going back. Your dad is spry, but he's no match for even one robot. I know! I built the type of muscles that they

they're stronger and quicker than human muscles. He won't get anywhere."

Paula stared at him pleadingly, her eyes troubled. She dropped her eyes under his intent stare.

"What does he plan on doing?" Jan demanded.

"I don't know," Paula said without looking up. "He didn't tell me."

"You said good-bye to him like you weren't expecting to see him again," Jan said half jokingly.

Paula turned her eyes back to the pool, her face a mask.

"I'll tell you everything I know," she said almost inaudibly. Jan slowly sat down on the grass beside her as she went on.

"You see," she said, her eyes still staring into the depths of the pool, "Dad expected this to happen; us to be captured this way. And he made plans. Plans he wouldn't discuss with me."

"Expected it?" Jan said. "I certainly didn't."

"Ever since his robot double has existed he's been obsessed with the pastime of trying to figure what it would do," Paula said. "He said that since ninety-nine percent of its mind was identical with his he should be able by putting himself in its place to determine what it would do. Day after day he would play-act in his mind what the robot Dr. Morris would do, how his ideas would go."

"**JUST** A week ago," she said tonelessly, "he told me that he expected the robots to start taking men about to die and transferring their minds into robots so as to get companions. He said that would inevitably lead to more and more robots until there was a nucleus of them. Eventually they would set themselves

against the race of the living, place their own welfare and interests above ours.

"He felt that before long they would make an effort to have us join them; become their allies, and that if we wouldn't they would either kill us outright or imprison us someplace like this estate where we couldn't escape but could live comfortably the rest of our lives. And he knew that if there would ever be a chance to destroy them, this would be the time. If they weren't destroyed at this time they never could be again."

She lifted her head, her gaze going out through the trees.

"He said it was war," she went on. "He said that if the first battle wasn't won, the human race would never have another chance to win. He told me he wanted you to know all this, but he made me promise not to tell you until it was too late to—"

Her voice was drowned out by a reverberating explosion. In one convulsive movement Jan had pushed her to the ground and thrown himself over her protectively.

Debris dropped around them, thudding as it struck the ground. A heavy plank buried its splintered end into the ground inches away with enough force so that if it had struck them it would have pierced both of them.

The rain of wreckage ceased. Jan lifted his head and looked toward the house. What was left of it was burning fiercely. He stood up and helped Paula to her feet.

"Come on," he said. "Your father was in there. We've got to get him out."

Paula shook her head numbly, her lips quivering.

"It's no use," she said. "I know now what he did. The explosive was in a belt around his middle." Tears welled from her eyes, but she kept

her head erect and proud. "He said they'd never notice a paunch. When I asked him what he would carry in it he said it would be an electronic device that would put them out of commission. I didn't suspect it would be an explosive."

"God!" Jan said. "He made himself into a living bomb!"

Paula nodded, her eyes filled with tears. Abruptly she broke, sobbing convulsively. Jan took her in his arms, hiding his face against her hair.

The fierce crackling of flame from the burning house were a staccato sound that drowned out Paula's heart-broken sobs.

"Those gosh darned dogs!" the fire chief said, darting a harrassed look in Jan and Paula's direction.

The sound of a rifle being fired came sharply through the trees.

"There goes another, I hope," the fire chief said.

A fireman rushed up.

"The fire's completely out now," he said. "Should we search through the ruins for bodies?"

"Yes," the chief snapped. "It shouldn't take long. There wasn't much left of the house to burn after the explosion. I heard it in town, and that's four miles from here."

The fireman hurried away.

"Those dogs," the fire chief said kindly to Jan and Paula. "Why'd he keep them? Wouldn't an electrified fence have kept people out?"

The fireman ran back.

"They've found part of a body," he said. "They also found something else that's mighty mysterious; some steel things that look an awful lot like skeletons. One of them was still smouldering. There was some sticky stuff on it burning. It smelled like rubber burning."

"How many of those did they find?" Jan asked sharply, fixing his

eyes bleakly on the fireman.

"Three so far," the man answered. "There might be more. We haven't finished searching yet."

"Three," Jan breathed. "Thank God!"

The motor of one of the fire trucks roared into life. Its bell clanged warningly as it started to leave.

The fire chief turned back to Jan and Paula and repeated his question. "Why'd he keep those dogs instead of using electrified fence, if his work here was so valuable he had to make sure nobody'd come around?"

"I think," Jan said slowly, "the reason was that there could be a power failure that would make an electrified fence no good. Another reason was that the dogs would attack people, while *machines* could pass

without being attacked by them."

"Oh, you mean automobiles?" the fire chief said. "Yes, I guess you're right. Must have been mighty dangerous experiments he was working on. That explosion..."

"As dangerous as the atom bomb," Jan said.

He watched the fire chief hurry away. There was a twisted, bitter smile on his face. He stroked Paula's hair tenderly.

"Did you hear that, Paula?" he said softly. "Three! That means that those three dyna-transcript minds are now destroyed. Your father didn't die in vain."

"Now I know why he told me to always remember it was *war*," Paula said. Her voice broke as she buried her head in Jan's shoulder.

THE END

(Cont'd From Page 74)

and destroy this marauder...! Just like that. The only trouble was, they didn't say how."

"All we did then was sit on Zeres Base and monitor the radio. Fortunately we caught the report as soon as it came in. A raid had been made on a Polar Colony, a fortune in tools and drugs taken, and murder done. The minute the alarm came in, we got a radar fix of the raider and were into space after him.

"We followed the raider. It was a conventional atomic and it headed straight out of the Martian orbit, so following it was no problem. But its potential velocity was as great as ours, of course, and as soon as it should find out it was being followed it could make evasive maneuvers. That would happen the minute it located any hostile action on our part.

"We got close to this straight line course and I had every hope of being able to sneak a high-speed projectile into it. Our computers worked like mad making up an orbit and a trajectory—all wasted. By the time we got close enough to use a projectile, their scanners picked us up and they changed course. Just like that—all the computation was wasted.

"When your relative velocities are measured in tens of thousands of miles per hour, your target-shooting is quite like knocking off ducks. So long as they chose they could simply alter course, unpredictably and we could try and follow them from then until doomsday—and we

wouldn't either be able to hit them with a projectile or be able to board them.

"For a week we chased them all over the System—at least in the Jovian regions and finally they gave us the slip. When we sat down on the Titan port of Lennes, we turned into spies. Everybody had one assignment. Visit every Bar and hangout where there would be the slightest clue to finding out the base of the raider. Brother, that's hard, because you can't disguise patrolmen, at least not very well.

"Eventually we didn't locate the base at all. We got it instead from a Martian station. An agent had gotten into the raiding group somehow and we learned that the raider was based on an asteroid.

"That was our chance. We shot out into the belt, hoped we hadn't been radarred or monitored. We landed on the lump, a small party went out and knocked out the radar and radio beacons, and we moved in.

"That's all there was to it—no glamorous space battles, no blasts of rays and projectiles, simply a lousy little ambush dependent for success on an informer. That's a pretty far cry from what the writer boys once thought space action would be."

"Well," I admitted, "you've made your point. There is no glamor or excitement in that kind of battle, but technology may provide you with an answer and the science-fiction writers with some vindication."

"How do you mean?" Baines asked.

"When the lab boys invent ray beams and ray guns," I grinned.



He went at the monsters with a tremendous zest

# TIME TRAP

By

Mallory

Storm

**The professor dug through the stratas of time the way a miner cuts through layers of earth in a search for treasure. But the professor uncovered pure dynamite**

**"B**AH!" SNAPPED Professor Xerxes Sleyman. "Time isn't just a word, Rance. It is quite material. It is the medium in which change takes place. Therefore, something must happen to it after it has passed. It can't vanish like smoke!"

Seated beside the indignant scientist in one of the lounge chairs of Hotel Solar on Venus, Rance Adair nodded solemnly and tried to look as if he were convinced. In reality, he could not see where this argument about the theoretical qualities of time was leading. Adair was interested in time only to the extent that he never seemed to have enough of it.

He was wishing regretfully that he had been able to catch the daily rock-

et liner to Earth which had left that morning. He had missed it by a matter of minutes because of a delay in getting some rock specimens properly packed. An interplanetary geologist, he found those rocks more valuable and worthy of attention than his own clothes.

And now, because he had missed the liner, he had chanced to run across Professor Sleyman, who had arrived the same morning on the Venus Daily. Adair should have been glad to see the pompous, little scientist, for Sleyman had been one of his teachers when he was a student at college. But Adair was far from glad. Hard experience had taught him that Sleyman and trouble went in pairs—where there was one, there would more than likely be



the other.

His experiences with Sleyman at college were things he tried hard to forget. They usually required his presence as a subject upon some hair-raising scientific experiment. Adair wondered often, with a touch of amazement, that those experiments had not left him mentally and physically warped.

He threw an appraising glance at Sleyman. What was the little rascal up to now? And what was he doing here on Venus?

**T**HE LITTLE scientist was leaning forward tensely. "Do you know the real nature of time? Do you know what becomes of it after it passes?"

"I'm afraid not," Adair replied. "I've never thought much about the matter."

"Bah! It seems that only I alone had the wisdom to realize the truth. Time, Rance, is material. It accumulates in much the same manner as dust accumulates upon any surface. Each passing second piles up on top of preceding seconds, each hour upon preceding hours. Time, in fact, piles up into layers—layers just like those formed upon the surface of the Earth during various geological periods. You're a geologist, Rance, and so you ought to know what I mean."

"I do," Adair answered. "But what are you leading up to? Don't tell me that you've gone and done what you once threatened to do—invented a time-machine."

Sleyman bobbed his head emphatically. "I have, Rance. Just that. And don't look so skeptical. See here, those geological layers can be investigated, can't they? You can dig into them and, in a rather fragmentary way, gain some knowledge of events and conditions of the past. In the same fashion,

I have learned how to dig into the layers of time, getting a much more complete knowledge of the past."

"Just another geologist!" Adair laughed. "But seriously, just how do you go about your time-digging?"

"The principle is a simple matter once you know the conditions involved. As some previous thinkers have dimly guessed, the fourth dimension has some relation to time. But the fourth dimension is not time itself. It is merely a time-nothingness, just as space is a three-dimensional nothingness. The fourth dimension, to be more exact, runs at right angles to the layers of time. You might visualize it as an elevator shaft running the length of a tall building, with the time-layers as the various floors."

"I'm beginning to understand," Adair said. "Your time-machine is a sort of glorified elevator in that it raises or lowers you through the fourth dimension to the layers of the past or future."

Sleyman beamed. "Exactly, Rance. But you're wrong about the future. We can't travel to the future because the layers of the future have not yet formed. They are forming now and are much too thin to penetrate. Visualize the building again. Let's say that it is being constructed. We are living on the topmost finished floor, with other floors in the process of being built above us. We could not occupy the upper floors because they have not yet been completed."

"I see. But just how does your time-machine make it possible to reach a certain time-layer?"

"Simply. I warp space to gain access to the fourth dimension. This is somewhat analogous to opening the doors of an elevator. Then, like the operator of that elevator, I have but to move the control-lever into any de-

sired notch, and my elevator will descend to the floor designated by that notch. However, I have no need of an elevator to descend through the fourth dimension. My formulae have shown me that the fourth dimension would be contracted by the distortion-field. All that is necessary to do is to regulate the intensity of the successive warps, and you would find yourself in the time-layer you desire to reach."

**A**DAIR PUT into words a thought which had been slowly forming in his mind. "Where is this time-machine of yours?"

Sleyman drew closer, glancing about secretively. "Right here on Venus, with me!"

"But why Venus?" Adair asked in puzzlement.

"Ah! That's where the beauty of my reasoning comes in, Rance. I intend to explore the past of Venus! But why Venus? you ask. Simply because I have not yet developed the distortion-field of my time-machine to a point where it will penetrate more than five-hundred years into the past. And the history of Earth during the past five-hundred years is clearly known. It would not be worthwhile to travel to the past of Earth.

"But Venus! What is known of the past of Venus? Nothing! What mysterious race built the immense and ingenious drains which have converted the Coryx flatlands from a gigantic marsh into solid land? And who built that great metal cube-building in the Jaexk fungus jungle? Certainly not the native Venusians. They lack both the intelligence and initiative required for such undertakings. I intend to find out who built those structures. And, Rance, I'm giving you the opportunity of a life-time! You have the honor of accompanying me on this

unique journey into the past."

Adair had been expecting this, and when it came he was not greatly surprised. Memory of the many similar honors done him in the past from which he had been fortunate enough to emerge whole made an excuse come promptly.

"I'm sorry, professor, but it's necessary for me to leave for Earth on the next ship."

"That's quite all right, Rance," Sleyman returned imperturbably. "Don't let that worry you. I intend to start as soon as possible. We are on the eternal day side of Venus, and so won't be bothered by lack of light. It'll be just like old times, won't it?"

Too much! Adair thought. He had to get out of this some way. Sleyman and his inventions were a combination that spelled trouble in capital letters.

"I can't do it," Adair said firmly. "I have a lot of important business to finish before I leave."

Sleyman looked hurt. "Come, come, Rance. Surely you can't have any doubts that my invention will work. I know it will, for I have put it through exhaustive tests on Earth. I think you're afraid to go."

"Playing your triumph card, eh?" Adair grinned. "Let me assure you that I have no fear of time-traveling. The only thing I'm afraid of is getting blown up by your invention. Something tells me you need moral support, professor. Come on, admit it."

"Well... Oh, damn it, Rance, you're right. I don't like the idea of going on this time-jaunt all by myself. Heaven alone knows what dangers might be laying in wait for me. Rance, surely you wouldn't leave your old professor to face unknown dangers!"

**A**DAIR RUBBED his chin, eyeing Sleyman speculatively. The little professor was obviously sincere. The only trouble was that his inventions seldom if ever worked the way they were supposed to. But if Sleyman was so sure of this one to the point of going along in it the chances were that it might be safe. Besides, Adair had a dare-devil streak in his makeup which at times made him wonder why he had ever become an interplanetary geologist. The idea of traveling in time appealed to him strongly.

"Alright, I'll go!" Adair said abruptly. "When do we start?"

Sleyman beamed. "I knew you wouldn't fail me, Rance. We'll leave just as soon as the necessary equipment can be gotten together, and a gyroplane rented." He pumped Adair's hand vigorously, then rose. "I'll start things blasting. Get your guns and knives, or whatever you use. Meet me at the spaceport in a half hour."

Adair nodded and watched Sleyman bounce happily away. Now I've let myself in for something, he thought. But he was in it already, and there was no backing out. He shrugged and rose to his feet, a tight grin pulling at the corners of his mouth. Going to his room, he opened his hastily packed luggage and extracted his field equipment.

At the appointed time, Adair met Sleyman at the spaceport. The lanky geologist looked something like a cross between Frank Buck and a storm trooper on active blitzkrieg. Sleyman was similarly attired.

"Everything's ready, Rance," Sleyman boomed. "I've got all my equipment loaded in the plane."

"Let's go, then," Adair said. "I'd like to get back before the next liner leaves for Earth. That is, if we do get back." He followed Sleyman across

the spaceport to where an old model H-41 gyroplane stood. The professor obviously believed in economy.

Adair took the controls and lifted the ship into the foggy air. "Where to? You haven't put me clear on that point."

"The Grand Cube of Jaexk, Rance. Whoever built the Coryx drains built the Cube also, and we'll be killing two birds with one stone by going to the Cube. It's a habitation of some sort, and in my opinion a base for the people who built the drains. The scientific world will certainly receive a jolt when we tell them just who those people were."

"If they didn't die out before five-hundred years ago," Adair reminded.

**S**LEYMAN looked as if something had suddenly tapped him over the head. "Uh! Never thought of that! Oh, well, if there's nobody there, I'll just have to develop a stronger distortion-field. And something tells me that's going to be hard if not impossible to do."

"Something tells me we're going on a fool's chase," Adair muttered. He swung the gyroplane around, and the city of Arxtyl began to drop behind. He drove watchfully, eyes narrowed to pierce the fog which hung like a grey veil before him.

Sleyman was clutching some of the more delicate parts of his invention, cradling them in his arms against the occasional lurches of the plane as Adair swung it abruptly aside to avoid hitting some city-bound ship. Visibility was little better than poor.

Beneath them now were the immense jelto plantations which spread their blue-grey blankets over the surface for miles. The number of plantations began to dwindle, and at last they began to approach the outer

fringes of the Jaexk fungus jungle. The jungles of Earth a million years in the past would have been somewhat similar to this one.

Adair cut the speed of the gyroplane and brought it down nearer to the surface, so that it would be easier to find what they were seeking. The Cube, though a huge structure, was almost hidden by surrounding vegetation.

A quarter of an hour later, Sleyman, who had been watching through a cabin window, suddenly let out a yell. "There it is, Rance! Just to the right."

Adair nodded and swung the gyroplane in the indicated direction. The Cube gradually emerged from the growths which towered around it. For a moment Adair poised the ship over the top of the cube, then let it sink down to a landing.

"Wild-looking place," Adair commented, gazing around. "Hope there aren't any savages near. These jungle Venusians are ten times worse than the ones us Earthmen claim to have tamed."

"How could any savages get up here?" Sleyman asked contemptuously. "We're three-hundred feet from the ground."

"Ever see a Venusian climb a mushroom-tree? Why, they practically run up! They're as agile as squirrels and almost as strong as any Earthly gorilla. And if you'll look around a bit, you'll notice that there are several mushroom-trees growing against the sides of this cube, right up here!"

"They won't bother us," Sleyman predicted. If the professor was performing an open-air experiment and a storm was approaching, he would have said something similar.

"Maybe," Adair grunted. "Well, let's get your time-machine unloaded. Where do you intend to set it up?"

"Within the cube, Rance. The distortion-field is a delicate thing, and I don't want anything to go wrong with it."

SLEYMAN'S apparatus was quite compact, and several trips sufficed to get it all within the topmost floor of the cube. This floor connected directly with the exterior by means of a ramp leading to a circular opening in the roof.

While Sleyman set up his time-machine in the light of a florolite beam—not enough illumination came through the circular opening above—Adair prowled about the room watchfully. He was too well acquainted with the professor to doubt for a second that there would be trouble. But he was not certain as to what form the trouble would take. He only knew that there would be trouble.

At last Sleyman had his time-machine set up, and Adair came over to have a good look at it. He found it rather disappointing. Instead of the bewildering complexity he had expected, there was only a web of glittering wires suspended between two vertical rods. The rods were of metal and were about seven feet tall. Connected in some incomprehensible way to the wire web were six small but extremely powerful atom motors.

Sleyman stood up, dusting off his hands. "Well, there it is, Rance. What do you think of it?"

"There's not enough of it, if you ask me," Adair grunted.

"Bah!" the professor snapped. "Nature accomplishes the same thing and with far simpler tools. Out in the void are any number of warps—both of time and of space. Don't value a thing by its impressiveness. Look at me—I'm not much to look at, but who could have accomplished the herculean feats of science I have done?"

Adair smiled at the professor's five-foot two inches of indignant rigidity. "I don't care to argue about it," he said. "Suppose we get started instead."

Sleyman nodded and bent down to switch on the atom motors. A vibrant hum filled the chamber and simultaneously a bluish glow leaped across the silvery strands of the web. The glow brightened momentarily, then died down. With it the web seemed to fade away. Only an occasional dim blue flicker told that it was still there.

**S**LEYMAN'S eyes were feverishly bright. "It has started perfectly, Rance! The gateway to the past is open. Between those two rods now exists a small but intense field of gravity stress. Space itself has been warped. The fourth dimension—our elevator shaft—has been contracted along a five-hundred year length. We are ready to step into the past!"

"I don't get it," Adair said slowly, gazing at the faint shimmer of the web. "You say that your invention warps space. Yet how can it affect the fourth dimension also?"

"The answer should be obvious, Rance. My distortion-field is designed not only to warp space, but to warp anything behind it. Since the fourth dimension, which is a time-nothingness, is different from space, which is a three dimensional nothingness, it follows that the fourth dimension will be affected differently. Instead of being warped, it is contracted. Do you see?"

Adair nodded, but he was beginning to suspect that a perfectly good geologist would soon be lost to the Solar System.

"Let's get started, Rance," Sleyman said eagerly. "I'll step into the field first. You wait a few seconds, then follow in after me."

The professor crossed to the faint

blue shimmer between the vertical rods which marked the field. The web of silver wires was invisible, and Adair guessed that it no longer existed in this dimension. As he watched, Sleyman stepped into the field; and a pale radiance leaped up around his slender form, outlining it clearly. The field bent in after him as if it were cohesive and reluctant to give him passage. Then the professor was through, and the field snapped back into place.

Adair was staring at the bluish aura between the metal rods, the rifle gripped tightly in his hands. Sleyman was gone! It was almost unbelievable. Had the professor actually stepped into the past?

Adair moved to the other side of the field, thinking that Sleyman might have merely come out through the other side. He did not see the little professor, but he saw that there was going to be trouble. Sleyman had set up his time-traveling apparatus almost directly before the doorway of the chamber in such a manner that anyone entering this chamber from the circular opening in the roof would have to pass through the field.

It was too late to remedy that. The lanky geologist did not dare to tinker with the apparatus. Something might go wrong.

For a moment he felt a touch of foreboding, and experienced an overwhelming desire to back out. He could understand the intricacies of geology, and the savagery of the Venusian natives. But this was something beyond him.

Adair tightened his lips and shrugged aside the quailing thought. To back out of anything just was not in his makeup. The daredevil streak in him would not permit that.

**H**E TENSED for a split second. Then he leaped through the field!



It seemed to him that he had plunged into a dense black liquid, which was at once boiling hot and piercingly cold. He felt a tingling sensation which was almost pain, and colored lights flamed inside his head. The next thing he knew he was sprawling on hands and knees. Things were normal again. Or were they?

Sleyman was helping him to his feet. "Rance, we've done it! We've gone back into the past! Look around. Notice how this room has changed?"

Swaying dizzily, Adair sought to focus his eyes upon the room. He let out an awed gasp. There was no doubt about it—the chamber had undergone an astounding metamorphosis.

Cracks no longer gaped in floor and ceiling. The walls were entirely free of grey fungoid growths. The creeping vines which had dangled from the circular opening in the ceiling and covered the ramp thickly were gone. An alien sense of newness pervaded the room.

Adair took a wondering step forward, but Sleyman's quick warning halted him.

"Wait, Rance! You'll walk into the field and get thrown back into our age."

The geologist narrowed his eyes and peered closely. Just ahead of him he could make out the faint blue shimmer of the distortion-field.

"It works on both sides," Sleyman explained. "The motors have enough fuel to hold the field up for some time. And now for a little exploration. We'll have to be careful, for there's no telling what we might run into."

Adair picked up his rifle, which had fallen from his grasp when he catapulted from the field, and crossed to the doorway leading from the room. He peered out into the corridor. Who were the inhabitants of this strange cube building? Were they still living?

These questions flashed through his mind as he raked the gloom-filled passageway.

The long corridor was not filled with rotting plant debris and fallen chunks of masonry as he remembered it. It was clean and had the same look of newness as the chamber in which he stood. It was deserted.

"Come on," Adair said softly. "Let's go." Gripping the rifle, he stepped into the corridor, Sleyman close at his side.

Not a sound came to them as they advanced slowly down the passageway. Though nothing was in evidence, the place seemed peopled with weird, alien life. The sable shadows which lay heavy about the walls seemed to take on grotesque shapes, eerily suggestive of what they might find. The corridor seemed interminably long as they cautiously moved down it. At the end was another ramp leading to a lower floor. Why were there ramps in this fantastic place? Adair wondered. What weird form did the inhabitants possess which made it impossible for them to use stairs? Or were they unaware of the existence of stairs?

**S**LOWLY, watchfully, they descended the ramp. At the bottom they found another corridor stretching before them.

"Rance," Sleyman whispered, "I've been thinking that it would have been safer to time-travel on Earth. There, at least, we could have been sure of what we might find. This suspense is terrifying..."

Adair grinned tightly. "We're here. We'd be fools to back out now. Don't you want to astound the scientific after all?"

Sleyman looked around. He gulped.

With Adair in the lead, they resumed their cautious pace. Still no sight of life met their eyes, and no

sound came to their ears. Adair was wondering if he hadn't been right when he suggested that the cube might be devoid of life. They had penetrated a mere five-hundred years into the past. The unknown people who built the cube might have been dead long before that.

Adair and Sleyman had descended another floor when they received their first intimation that the cube was inhabited after all. From out of the heavy silence came a deep, throbbing sound. It was like no sound they had ever heard before. It combined the mechanical thunder of a rocket ship with the low rolling of a Venusian winter storm. It pulsed through the corridors like the life flow in some vast body.

The two scientists stood frozen into immobility. Their eyes were questing among the shadows, and their ears were straining for a repetition of the sonorous throbbing.

It came again—deeper and more forceful than before. And this time it was accompanied by a thin wailing. The wailing swelled into a weird, musical chant which rose and fell like the beat of surf upon some unearthly shore. It had a reverent, supplicating note to it.

Sleyman was gripping Adair's arm in a tight clutch. "Rance! That noise... people! There are people here in this cube."

"And they're obviously intelligent," Adair said softly. "There's a purpose of some sort behind their chanting. Sounds like it's coming from below. Come on, let's investigate."

If they were cautious before, they were even more so now. That the cube was inhabited, they were now certain. But with what sort of life was it peopled? Would they find some grotesque beings from out of the farthest gulfs of space?

Adair's body was rigid. His grip

on the rifle made the flesh of his fists stand out whitely. Beside him Sleyman was looking like a wide-eyed gnome.

They moved forward again through corridor after corridor, down ramp after ramp. And with them moved the ever deepening throbbing. Rooms opened from the corridors down which they passed, but they did not pause to peer into them. Every atom of their beings was concentrated upon the growing thunder of the pulsations.

AND THEN, as they descended another ramp, there stretched before them not another corridor but a vast chamber. This whole floor was one gigantic chamber. The sounds were coming from it. But they were not listening to the sounds. Transfixed, they were staring at a huge bright object which stood in the center of that chamber, resting upon a great stone block. The stone block seemed to float in a pool of fire, and flames rose and fell about it, licking at the huge crystal cube which reposed upon its surface. Every time the flames rose, a deep reverberation rolled through the place.

And every time the flames rose, they caught a glimpse of the beings that were kneeling in worship before the crystal cube.

"Do you see what I see?" Adair hissed. "Or have we both gone crazy? Unless we have, the people down there are Martians!"

In the light of the pulsing flames the kneeling figures were revealed as small, hairy creatures, with barrel chests and thin limbs. Their forms were unmistakable—they were undoubtedly Martians. But what were Martians doing on Venus?

"This isn't what I expected, Rance," Sleyman whispered. "Martians the inhabitants of this place was the last thing I'd have have believed. Why

nothing about this building suggests anything Martian!"

"Exactly," Adair replied. "Why should the architecture be so radically different from anything we've seen on Mars? And, professor, do you see what they're doing down there? They're worshipping that cube!" Adair was beginning to understand other things. He knew now why the various floors were connected with ramps instead of stairs. The heavier gravity of Venus made it difficult for the Martians to move around, and climbing stairs would require great effort. The ramps made it possible for them to reach the upper floors much more easily.

But why had they designed this building in the form of a cube? And why were they worshipping an object which was another cube? What connection was there between them? Sleyman answered these questions just as Adair was arriving at a conclusion himself.

"Rance, I think I've got everything. That crystal cube down there gave me the lead. This is a temple, don't you see? Their worship of that crystal cube is a new form of religion, one that we've never heard of before. I think it was necessary for these Martians to migrate here to Venus because their new form of religion was not tolerated on Mars."

"That checks with what I've guessed," Adair said. "Well, now that we know who built this place and why, I suggest that we return while we've got the chance."

Sleyman nodded and followed after Adair as the latter began to return up the ramp. And then, so suddenly that it nailed them motionless, a shrill yell knifed through the chanting!

**T**HEY WHIRLED around in unison, their weapons raising to the ready. Down in the flame-lit cham-

ber, just at the base of the ramp, a Martian was standing. One of his thin arms was pointing up at the two scientists, and yell after yell poured from his throat.

"They've discovered us!" Adair rapped. "Run for it! We can't take any chances upon what sort of a welcome they'll give us!"

Sleyman's face went white with sudden horror. "Rance! Oh, Lord, I've just remembered that we haven't marked the room in which we left the field!"

Adair bit out a curse. They wouldn't have any time to find the room with the Martians after them. They were caught—trapped!

He sent a despairing glance down the ramp. The Martians in the chamber were on their feet. They were staring upward, gesticulating and speaking in high, excited tones. Already several of them were beginning to ascend the ramp, strange weapons gripped in their hands.

"There's no friendliness about them," Adair said tightly. "They mean business. Start running. I'll hold them off as long as I can, then join you. I can run faster than you—"

There was a sharp hiss and something like a bolt of lightning flashed past his ear. Adair's eyes narrowed to blazing slits. They wanted trouble—they were going to get it!

Adair fell to one knee and began firing down the ramp. His raking fire bit into the thick press of the oncoming Martians, knocking them backward into their fellows, screaming and inert. He was conscious of someone blazing away at his side. He flashed a look. It was Sleyman. The little professor hadn't retreated. Whatever his faults may have been, they didn't include lack of courage.

Appalled at the toll the withering fire had taken of their fellows, the Martians in the chamber temporarily

gave up the idea of trying to ascend the ramp. They sent a furious barrage of bolts ripping up at the two scientists. But Adair and Sleyman had taken shelter behind the bend of the opening.

Adair peered cautiously down into the chamber. The Martians were doing something to two large, metal boxes. Near them stood two powerful Venusians with chains dangling about their bodies. Then the boxes were given to the two Venusians whom Adair guessed were slaves. One of the Martians—a priest, obviously, for he was decked in glittering ornaments—shrilled out arrogant commands to the Venusians. They nodded sullenly and began to climb the ramp under cover of a storm of bolts.

"Run like hell!" Adair snapped. "They mean to get us this time!" He gripped Sleyman by the arm and began to plunge down the corridor. Something told him they would never make it—a sense of disaster that sent icy creepings up his spine.

**D**ARTING a swift look over his shoulder, Adair saw that the two Venusians had already gained the corridor and were leaping after them. They could run almost as fast as a horse of Earth. And as they ran, they were bringing up the boxes of metal.

From cone-shaped projections in the front of the boxes, white bubbles shot out. The bubbles flew with terrific speed after the two scientists, growing in size.

Adair looked backward again, and as he saw what was taking place, let out a groan. The ramp was just ahead, but he knew they would never make it. One of the weird bubbles was just behind him. It paused for a split second. Then like a flash, it launched itself at his head! Adair experienced a brief tingle of agony—then blackness.

Adair regained consciousness slowly, like a sleeper emerging from the throes of a bad dream. He stared around uncomprehendingly, half expecting to find himself back in the safety of a bed five-hundred years in the future. But what he saw caused full realization to flood back to him.

Directly before him, upon the block of stone, was the huge crystal cube. It glowed brilliantly as the pulsating flames licked at it. At his side was Sleyman, who was just beginning to stir. He and the professor were securely bound with thin chains fastened to metal stakes in the floor.

About them the Martians were prostrated in worship before the cube. Their shrill chants mingled with the deep sounds evoked by the touch of the flames upon the cube.

Adair stared into the flames dully, unseeingly. His mind was a chaos of desperate thoughts. He and the professor were captives of the Martians—a race of degenerate beings who had proved themselves definitely enemical. What was going to happen to them? Why had the Martians taken them alive?

The shrill chanting had quickened in tempo until the great chamber rung with the echoes. It took on a frenzied, hysterical quality, built up to a thundering crescendo. Then it ceased abruptly.

Adair looked around to see what was going to take place. The Martians about him had an eager, expectant air. And then twelve gaudily bejeweled priests appeared, walking with a measured rhythm. Adair's eyes widened. Between those priests, one limb held by four of them, were three Venusian slaves, literally sheathed in thin, metal chains. The priests approached the circular pit from which the flames arose, halted. They made an obeisance before the crystal cube.

Again the Martians were chanting.

This time their chant was fiercely exultant, lustful. It pounded in a wild, barbaric rhythm that stirred the blood. As the chanting grew in tempo and volume, the priests began to swing the bound Venusian slaves. They swung the slaves faster and faster, until their grey bodies arched high in the air. And then, at the top of one of the swings, the priests abruptly released the slaves. There were horrible screams as the three Venusians disappeared into the searing flames.

**T**HEN THE priests turned in unison to where Adair and Sleyman lay bound to the stakes. They began to walk forward with deadly purpose!

"They're coming after us!" Sleyman cried. He had recovered in time to witness the last part of the ceremony.

Adair threw his weight against the chains in a frenzied effort to break loose. But they were too strong. "The dirty devils!" he gritted. His lips locked tightly together, he glared in defiance at the approaching Martians.

The faces of the priests were twisted in sadistic delight. They lifted the struggling forms of the two scientists and carried them to the pit of the flames. The chants of the other Martians were literally screams of lustful expectancy.

Adair felt himself being swung in the air. He twisted and kicked futilely. The flames seemed to be reaching forward hungry arms—

And then the sound of a shot blasted into the hellish chanting! One of the priests holding Adair fell forward to the ground. Another shot followed and a second priest sank down limply. The others howled in fright and released the two scientists.

Adair raked the flame-lit chamber with incredulous eyes. Up on the ramp he saw two figures dressed in white

tropical garments. They were Earthmen! But what were Earthmen doing here on Venus—especially a Venus five-hundred years in the past?

The two arrivals were pumping shot after shot into the ranks of the Martians, who, squealing in terror, were diving for shelter. But now the Martians were bringing their own weapons into play, and bolts began hissing at the two Earthmen on the ramp.

"The force bubbles!" Sleyman yelled above the tumult. "They'll get them with the force bubbles!"

Adair nodded quickly and roared out a warning. "Look out! They've got superior weapons! Get out of here as fast as you can and bring help."

The two men seemed to understand, for they retreated up the ramp and disappeared around the corner of the opening. Waving their weapons and shrieking at the top of their voices, the Martians poured after them. Adair saw several of the unwilling Venusian slaves being herded forward with the heavy metal-boxes which generated the bubbles of stunning force.

Sleyman twisted around to face Adair. "They were Earthmen, Rance! How did they get here? Why, we're five-hundred years in the past!"

"I think I have the answer," Adair replied tersely. "You set up your time-machine before the doorway of that room in such a way that anyone passing through it would be caught by the distortion-field and get thrown into the past just as we have. I think they must have been sight-seeing tourists."

Sleyman's face lit up with eager hope. Then it clouded again. "Rance, if those Martians capture them..."

"We're sunk," Adair finished. "These religious fanatics intend to feed us to the flames."

**N**EARLY half the Martians had gone in pursuit of the two Earth-



men. Only two dozen were left in the chamber with Adair and Sleyman. They surrounded the two scientists watchfully, weapons waving in their fists.

But Adair was paying no attention to them. He was craning forward, his ears straining for some indication of what was taking place up in the building. He breathed a silent prayer that the two mysterious Earthmen would not be captured.

Suddenly he heard a series of deep, staccato clacks, and simultaneously there followed terrified Martian screams. Adair's heart leaped up with wild hope. Those tones were Venusian! Had the slaves turned against their masters?

And then bedlam broke loose! Guns blasted with a terrific din, intermingled with the shrieks and wails of the Martians. Alarmed, the Martians guarding Adair and Sleyman ran toward the ramp. They started to scurry up. But they turned and fled as their comrades came running down in headlong flight!

After the Martians streamed a horde of shouting Venusians, armed with spears, knives, and out-moded rifles. With them were the slaves, who were fiercely sending force bubbles at their former masters. The two bands of Venusians, though separated by a gap of five-hundred years, had joined hands to exterminate a common foe. And they had done a good job of it. Almost half of the Martians had been exterminated, and more were still falling.

Suddenly Adair heard a shouted order, and looking around he saw three figures descending the ramp. Two of them were the Earthmen and the other was a hulking Venusian dressed in dirty tropical white.

"You got here in the nick of time," Adair called out joyfully. "A few seconds later, and those Martians would

have tossed us into the flames."

"Martians? Flames? Good Lord!" one of the two Earthmen ejaculated. "I thought this place was uninhabited for centuries!"

"It will be," said Sleyman. "Get these chains off of us, and I'll explain."

The Venusian in dirty whites called out an order, and several of his men came hurrying forward. They were jungle Venusians, huge, powerful reptile-men. They made short work of breaking apart the slender chains.

Adair stood up, rubbing his wrists, and eyeing the two Earthmen curiously. He saw that he would have to revise an earlier observation, for only one of them was a man. The other was a girl, tall and slender, with ebony hair peeping from under the brim of her tropical helmet.

The lanky geologist lost no time in introducing Sleyman and himself.

"I'M KENNETH GILFORD, an interplanetary archaeologist," said the other. "And this is my daughter, Chloe." He pointed at the Venusian in dirty whites. "That's Orth, our guide. I came here to check a theory on who the inhabitants of this strange structure were. We made camp on the roof, and shortly after we got settled down, we were visited by this band of Venusian natives. They must have seen us land and came to investigate. Fortunately, they were friendly enough.

"While Orth kept them occupied, my daughter and I entered the first chamber for a short look. She has never been here before, you see. Anyway, as we started to enter the doorway leading out to the corridor, something happened. There was a brief flash of pain, and the next thing we knew, we were in a room that had been strangely rejuvenated.

"Orth came after us to see that we did not get lost. We were all so intrigued by the change that we didn't return at once. Then we heard that weird throbbing noise, and decided to investigate.

"You both know what happened then. We arrived just in time to prevent those Martians from flinging you two into the flames. They pursued us, and we would have been caught if the Venusians hadn't luckily gotten impatient for us to return and come after us."

Gilford stared at the flame-bathed cube, then looked around the chamber at the fallen Martians. "What in the world is this all about?" he asked, puzzled. "What are those Martians doing here?"

This was the cue for Sleyman to plunge into his element—explanations. He did so with his usual thoroughness.

It was almost too much for Gilford and the girl to assimilate in one dose. They looked dazed.

"If you didn't look sane, and if I wasn't positive that I were, I'd say that we all were crazy!" Gilford muttered. "Martians... time-machine—Lord! Why, the scientific world will be turned upside down when this gets out!"

Sleyman beamed triumphantly.

Gilford looked around for his Venusian guide, and suddenly his eyes sharpened. Orth and the other Venusians were stealthily removing the jewels and gold ornaments from the bodies of the dead Martians.

"Orth!" Gilford snapped out. "What do you think you're doing? Come over here!"

Orth came sullenly. "We take money-stones," he explained defiantly.

"They're not yours for the taking!" Gilford roared. "This is an archaeological expedition and not a pirate expedition. Those jewels and ornaments are valuable archaeological finds.

Think I want you and your friends to squander them away on whiskey?"

"We take!" Orth snarled. "You not stop me. This make me rich Venusian!"

Adair came hurrying up with his and Sleyman's weapons which he had managed to locate. "What's wrong?"

"This rascal is taking everything he can lay hands on," Gilford answered. "I've told him to stop, but he refuses to do so."

"Better obey him," Adair told Orth levelly. "He's your boss-man."

"No!" Orth cried in rage. "They mine! I take. I be rich. You stop me, I kill you!" His primitive mind, enflamed by the threat he saw in the attitudes of the Earthmen, he brought up his weapon!

**A**DAIR REACTED instantly—shot it out of his hand. Orth reeled backward, clutching the wounded member. He began screaming curses. With menacing growls, the other Venusians started forward.

"Stop!" Adair ripped out. "Move again and I shoot!"

But Orth began shouting out commands in the Venusian tongue, and his men kept coming.

Adair dared not to fire again for fear of precipitating a bloody attack. "Move toward the ramp," he told the others softly. "They mean to jump us."

Releasing sudden yells, the Venusian savages hurtled forward! Adair clamped his lips tight with deadly purpose—he began firing into the leading natives as fast as he could pull the trigger. His sweeping fire cut into them like a hot knife into butter.

But Adair knew that it was hopeless. The Venusians outnumbered them five to one. They were clawing forward with reckless ferocity, voicing guttural snarls.

And then there came a deep buzzing

sound. Venusians began slumping to the ground, their features twisted in agony. The others whirled around to meet the unexpected attack.

Shrieking vengefully, several Martians were pushing forward a cylinder mounted on wheels. From one end of that cylinder a green ray was spraying. It made a buzzing noise. Where it touched a Venusian, he crumpled immediately in death.

"This is our chance!" Adair cried. "Run to the top!"

The Venusians made no effort to stop them. They were occupied with seeking safety and at the same time picking off the Martians behind the ray machine.

The corridors seemed endless as Adair and the others plunged down them. The legs of the lanky geologist were working like the driving pistons of a rocket freighter. He threw anxious glances over his shoulder as he ran. At any minute now the Venusians would exterminate the rest of the Martians and come racing after them. And Venusians could run with "terrific speed."

Suddenly there was a sullen roar. And then there came the triumphant shouts of the Venusians.

"What was that?" gasped the girl.

"The Venusians must have put the Martian ray machine out of action," Adair panted. "They'll be after us now. Hurry!"

Sleyman was beginning to fall behind. He was too old to keep up the headlong pace.

"You go on, Rance," he gasped weakly. "I—I'll stay and hold them off."

Adair's eyes glinted in admiration for the plucky, old scientist. But it was not in him to leave Sleyman behind. If anyone stayed, it would be himself. He shook his head fiercely and swung the professor across his

back. He started again at a staggering run, his chest heaving.

**B**EHIND THEM a series of thin, exultant yells sounded. The Venusian savages were hot in pursuit. Adair groaned in desperation, and tried to quicken his pace.

But he did not succeed in going any faster. Sleyman was an immense weight, his lungs burned like fire, and his legs ached with exhaustion. The blood pounded in his ears with a dull roaring. Things were beginning to whirl before his eyes.

"We've reached the top!" Gilford cried suddenly. "Where is the room—in which—the field is—is situated?"

Adair bit into his lower lip until the blood came. They had almost reached safety—and now they could not find the field. The Venusians were almost upon them—would kill them before they could find it. Safely lay somewhere near and they did not know where it was.

"We don't know where the field is," Sleyman whispered. "We forgot to mark the room—"

"Look!" the girl cried out. "Father, there's your specimen pick! You dropped it when you came out of the field and forgot to pick it up. It marks the room where the field is! Oh!"

Swarming up the ramp at the far end of the corridor came the Venusians! Orth was in the lead. They broke into eager, lustful shouts as they saw the Earthmen. They pounded forward, faces contorted in triumph!

Adair swung Sleyman to his feet. "Get into the field!" he snapped to the others. "Quick!" He fell to one knee and began firing at the oncoming savages. One of his opening shots caught Orth in the chest. The guide swayed, clutching at the bloody wound. Then he slumped limply to the

floor. The other Venusians halted momentarily, confused by the death of their leader. And then, screaming with fury, they plunged madly forward!

A spear whizzed past Adair's ear, and a knife carved a bloody furrow along his arm. Bullets from antiquated rifles hummed by like angry bees. But Adair was hardly conscious of that. His whole being was intent upon the furious barrage he sent pounding into the heaving, grey wall of charging natives. The rifle grew hot in his hands.

And then there was a metallic click instead of a sharp report. The rifle was empty!

There was no time to reload. Leaping to his feet, Adair hurled the useless weapon into the faces of the nearest Venusians. Then he whirled into the room where the others had already gone, and threw himself into the field.

He emerged into normalcy flat on his face, bounced up. Seizing the rifle from the hands of a gaping Gilford, he hurled himself around, sent the stock crashing into the metal rods which supported the shimmering web. There was a sharp, ripping sputter, the atom motors thundered in protest as the energy they poured out was torn from its usual channels—and the distortion-field was no more.

**T**HEN AND only then did Adair relax the will-power which had kept his battered body going. He sank in blissful darkness to the floor.

A black pool, spinning, revolving, around a pin-point of light that grew larger and larger until it framed Chloe's face in a ring of flame. Chloe was smiling and holding forth her hands in invitation. Invitation was also reflected in her smile, and Adair reached toward her, only to have the

circle of light vanish and reappear in another spot, with Chloe smiling again, reaching her arms toward him again, chiding him for being so slow.

Adair called out to her. Then the darkness began revolving anew and the face of Chloe saddened and grew smaller and finally vanished.

When Adair came around again, he found himself lying on the roof of the building, propped up by a folded coat. Chloe Gilford was bathing his face with a moistened cloth. She had removed her helmet, and her black hair curled about her shoulders. Adair decided that whatever valuable discovery the others might have made, his was the best. The girl was superlative.

Adair struggled up to one arm. He looked around. He breathed a sigh of relief. Sleyman and Gilford were having an argument about something. But that wasn't what he was looking for. It was the gyroplanes. The sight of them told him more than anything else that he was back where he belonged.

"We're home!" he breathed. "It's funny, but I've never thought of the twenty-second century as home before. It's good to get back."

"If it wasn't for you," said Chloe, "we'd never have gotten back. You were very brave," she added softly.

Somehow, Adair found himself unable to add or subtract anything from that. He looked into the girl's eyes for confirmation of what he thought he had heard in the tones of her voice—found it. She dropped her gaze, and studied the tips of her small boots intently.

Adair grinned suddenly, and felt very good. He felt almost good enough to go time-traveling again.

**THE END**



Skott pulled his new body up the ramp




# THOUSAND- LEGGED AGENT

By

Ncel Loomis

**The assignment called  
for an agent with the  
brain of a genius, the  
intelligence of a super-  
man, and the body of  
an over-sized scorpion!**



**S**KOTT STEVENS crawled gingerly up the special ramp on his hundred legs. His eight-foot-long, chitinous body twisted behind him like a Centipede's, exactly as it was supposed to do. He reached the great glass door through which all must pass who had business with the headquarters of Metagalactic Intelligence. It opened, and he went through. His military escort stayed outside.

He crawled up the circular ramp to the tenth floor. He could have gone up in the elevator, but his body was always flat against the floor and there was a danger of startling some of the multitudinous entities around MGHQ, and of getting stepped on. Or was that the real reason?

In these months of preparation, his

body had learned to work automatically, until now the rhythmic pattern of the hundred legs—actually there were ninety-six—was no longer even a conscious thing. But Skott had a distaste for his body. That was why he avoided the elevator. Even through his Centipede's eyes he looked repulsive to himself, and he knew how he affected others, for he had seen even a three-legged Octopus from Phad draw back when he made his sinuous way across the floor of the somatoplastic hospital on Tarazed XVIII.

It was quite a walk up to the tenth floor, for his lungs, even though they had a gadget in them to handle chlorine instead of oxygen, still didn't turn it into fuel fast enough to sustain him in lengthy exertion. He would have given something to take off the head-bubble, filled with gas that made everything look a ghastly green—but now he couldn't. He would not be able to breathe free air again until he got to Thenox VIII where the atmosphere was chlorine.

He was ushered into the office of Colonel Jarvg, a native of one of the planets of Lesuth, Lambda Scorprii, who looked very much like a huge Kangaroo wearing glasses. The colonel came from behind his desk and shook hands as well as he could with one of the four degenerate arms that hung from Skott's chest. "Sit down, Captain," he said.

Skott said dryly, "Thanks, I'll stand."

Colonel Jarvg went behind his desk and looked across at Skott. "You've had a rather arduous year of preparation, Captain. How'd you get along at the Hospital?"

Skott spoke through his built-in vocoform. "Okay, sir. They built so many gadgets into my body that I don't know what is me and what isn't."

"I'm curious," said the colonel. "The

Capellans are miracle surgeons, but how—is that horny stuff real or—"

"The chitin is real all over me," said Skott. "They grafted pieces of live chitin to my flesh and grew it out to suit their blueprints. They operated on my eyes and changed them over until they see everything a real Centipede's eyes can see. But the thing that bothers me most is my arms. They strapped them against my sides and actually imbedded them in my flesh—and sometimes I think I can't stand it, not being able to move them."

"It won't be so much longer," said Colonel Jarvg. "Your translation is set for 7500 centichrons—about sundown—and I want to brief you now."

He glanced at a sheet of zinc paper on his desk, and Skott was thinking that two years before, when he had joined the great Metagalactic Intelligence and had been sent here to Tarazed, Gamma Aquilae, for training and assignment, he had been sophomorically thrilled by the adventure of it—but he had not anticipated anything like this.

The colonel looked up. "You've been trained for two years, and you've had the most advanced plastic surgery and somatic conditioning that the resources of the Second Metagalaxy can provide. You have a perfect disguise—but remember, it is only a disguise. On the inside you're still a Man, and X-rays would show that instantly." He looked at Skott over his glasses, and Skott nodded.

"You know you're going to Thenox, I believe."

"Yes, sir, but I don't know where Thenox is."

THE COLONEL pointed to a three-dimensional map of black spaces and glowing stars that filled one great wall. "Out here"—he pointed to the

left—"at about X hours by your Earth-reckoning, and at a distance of some seven hundred thousand light-years, is the star-cluster known as N. G. C. 6822, or, as it is designated for military purposes, the Hundred and Seventh Metagalaxy. There is a star there which we call Thenox in code, and all of its many planets—just as the MI has taken over all of the planets of Tarazed—are overrun by a race of Centipedes who have kept the Second's military on edge for two hundred years. It started just before the turn of this century—just before 325,000 A.D."

"Yes, sir."

"We've had agents on the Thenoxian planets. We know now that they are planning some sort of extensive activity with radioactives. We have quite a bit of information now, but as you see, it's hard to get—and there is one thing we must know: what kind of fission material are they using?"

"Is that my job, sir?"

"It is, Captain. Others have gone ahead of you and have scouted the way. I will give you maps to memorize that will show you the exact layout of the enormous secret war laboratory on Thenox VIII. When you leave this building you will be taken to a duplicate of the laboratory, constructed to scale as far as the pertinent areas are concerned." Colonel Jarvg walked across the room, balancing himself with his heavy tail. Then he turned and said impressively:

"Your sole mission is to walk through the single big room where they attach the detonating mechanisms to the bombs or whatever they are making, turn on your built-in thyatron counter for one second—long enough for a recording on microfilm of the hard radiation in that room—and get away!"

He went back and sat down. He said impressively, "It is obvious that you must escape alive—and the catch is that they have detection apparatus that will sound an alarm when you turn on your counter. Most of your training has been aimed at your escape. We must have that picture. Our specialists can then identify the element, estimate when the attack will come, and probably what entities are aiding the Centipedes, for the sources of radioactives are fairly well known. Well—any questions?"

"Will I be alone?" asked Skott.

Colonel Jarvg looked over his glasses. "There will be one other agent on Thenox with you. You will not recognize that agent, because of the same disguise you are bearing. But that agent's sole mission is to help you escape. And—oh, yes, one other thing: we'll have to send you by the eighth dimension. It's been used only a few times and we don't know too much about the after-effects, although MI Research on Tarazed XXII has been working on it for a thousand years. But I think you'll be all right. Anyway, the Centipedes have recently established a twelfth-dimensional resistance screen, and this is the only way we know of to penetrate it without triggering the force of some ten to the twenty-second ergs per cubic centimeter—and that's the energy of a small earthquake per c. c."

"It sounds pretty violent," said Skott.

"It's unimaginably destructive." Jarvg came from behind his desk. "All clear?"

"Yes." Skott disliked shaking hands with his flabby little arms that reminded him of worms hanging from his chest, but he managed.

"You'll get your plans and written instructions at the desk," said Colonel

Jarvg. "Destroy them before you leave. And by the way, Captain—"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll see you tomorrow about this time."

"Tomorrow, sir?"

"Yes. You'll be on Thenox only a very small part of the time, the way we have it figured. About six centichrons, is my guess."

**SKOTT SALUTED.** "Yes, sir. Tomorrow at this time." He left. He was pleased. Only one more day to wear this Centipede shell. He picked up the maps he was to memorize. One more day and he could begin to free his own arms, and maybe some day he could forget the aching torture of having them fastened into his sides for months on end. . . .

He awoke with a start. The Muir field had overcome him, but now he opened his eyes and looked through the greenish gas at the backs of hundreds of Centipedes, all scurrying along on their innumerable legs. It was strange that they all should be crawling along a wall—and then he realized with a start that it was *he* who was on a wall.

He was clinging to a bare wall some twenty stories above the ground on Thenox VIII. For an instant he felt weak all over, but then he realized that the tactile pads on his ninety-six legs would have no trouble holding him, though it was a shock to find himself head down over the street. Apparently he had landed according to plan, on the roof of the Central Building Supply Company that manufactured boulders—for their information was that there were few natural rocks left on Thenox VIII. MI had picked this spot because it would be inconspicuous. Skott had been briefed to enter Thenoxian traffic by going down the outside wall. While that wasn't habitual for the Centipedes, still it was not un-

usual, for elevator service was a privilege of the military. So here he was, half-way down, with full consciousness returning.

Gingerly he tried his legs, and was relieved to find that he could lift his feet and set them down and they took hold without effort on the smooth wall. He began to walk down.

It was disturbing to find that he was the only one on the entire wall, but he made his way straight down, for there were no windows. He was almost down when he realized that Centipedes on the ground had stopped and were watching him.

He slowed. From the front entrance of the building came a big Centipede on the run, and Skott saw a chain on its neck and a badge that signified a military guard.

Skott froze for an instant. There was not supposed to be any guard at this building. Obviously things had changed after the last report. Skott started on down, then hesitated. He didn't care to be picked off of a wall, but on the other hand his height gave him a slight advantage.

The guard stopped below him, holding a weapon aimed at him from just in front of its chest. Its order came to him in a buzzing voice over the tiny perceptix concealed under his human skull: "Come down slow!"

It jarrèd him into full alertness. He raised his head higher. In each of his four vestigial hands he held a small weapon. As he raised his head to hold the guard's attention, with two of his hands he flipped two tiny cover-grenades.

**THE INSTANT** he released them they puffed out a great cloud of pink smoke—pink because the Centipedes hated any color that was not harmonious with the green gas they breathed. Skott held his breath and

darted into the cloud, then, covered by it, he slanted off to the right. He reached the sidewalk and started across the street. There had been an opening there.

But he slammed hard into a body. He looked into the horny eyes of the big guard. The guard fired at his head. There was a jerk at his neck, and Skott's auditory organs were momentarily stunned with sound. Skott gasped. He had forgotten to remove the bubble!

He threw his third grenade at the guard's face. It exploded. Skott felt the heat. The blast knocked him off balance. He whirled. The bomb had made a momentary vacuum in the pink cloud. In that space he saw the guard's angry face. The guard was staring at his own small dangling arms. The two right ones had been blown off, and a brown fluid was oozing from the stumps.

Skott didn't wait. He threw the other smoke-bomb to the center of the street and shot into the cloud it made. In the center of the cloud he came face to face with a Centipede. It stared at him without apparent emotion. Then it dodged aside to let him pass. He raced across the street, remembering his maps. He slithered in between two big buildings. The space between them was about half the width of a man's head. Skott flattened himself and ran up one wall toward the opposite street. It was damp there. He remembered the maps. Those two buildings were connected at the front. He set his course diagonally toward the top.

There was a great buzzing and clanging from the street he had left. He rose on the one wall above the building at his back and looked over it. On the front of the building down which he had just come, he saw a chilling sign in great, glowing Thenoxi-

an letters, composed of curving lines and many dots, curiously like a Centipede's track:

"Armed Headquarters, 107th Metagalaxy."

No wonder, then; he had attracted attention—especially with his bubble still on! What a way for a super-agent to make an entrance! He chuckled. Then he was grim. He was in the clear now. He crawled around the corner of the building he was on and started leisurely down the front—but he held his breath.

He wasn't challenged. He reached the street and thankfully drew a deep breath of chlorine. He set out casually on alternate route B for the Thenoxian war laboratory. But he didn't *feel* casual. He was appalled at the significance of the sign he had seen. That headquarters had been established since the last MI agent had been on Thenox. It was headquarters for the entire 107th Metagalaxy. That meant one thing: the 107th planned offensive action—and soon. That made the success of his own mission imperative....

HE FOLLOWED the twisting street, according to his memory of the maps. He made a turn and found himself in a stream of traffic that approached the laboratory by an underground service entrance. He was challenged but passed. The first scrutiny was perfunctory. He passed three guards, and each was more demanding, but presently he walked off of the freight elevator, passed another guard, rounded a turn and ducked into a connecting passageway. A moment later he was approaching the main entrance to the laboratory proper by the passenger route.

He recognized the tunnel that led into the laboratory. He went up to it, stopped for a detector test. He had,



of course, no metals in his body that would register. All of his built-in apparatus was plastic, even to the emulsion on the photographic film in his Geiger, and the old-fashioned pistol hidden in a pocket between two scales underneath his body.

He passed into the tunnel. This was a fifteen-foot wall. That meant hard radiation inside. The wall was not for protection—because the Centipedes were immune to hard stuff—but for secrecy.

He was breathing hard as he followed the twisting tunnel. He was close now. It was a good thing they had tested him for claustrophobia. The tunnel was three feet wide but only six inches high. He kept his head down.

Light came through the gas. He walked out into the room, momentarily exultant. He had penetrated to the most closely guarded spot in the half a septillion worlds of the Fourth Universe. It was a giant room, low, as were all Centipede structures. It was hardly half a kilometer high. The Centipedes didn't like head-room. It was filled with the same green gas. But its width gave Skott a sobering thought. What he had next to do—walk across that room to the other side—was up to him. The metagalactic scientists had no magic to get him across that floor under the low ceiling through the green gas swirling from the movements of thousands of Centipede workers installing fission material in bombs and shells. Nothing but training, acting ability, and sheer brass would take him to the other side alive.

Through the haze he saw the far door. It appeared to be a quarter of a mile away. A sharp voice came through his tentacles. "Stop!"

With nerves taut, he turned his horny eyes to the left. There were three guards. The big one said, "Identify

yourself," while the second one watched with sharp, glassy eyes, and the third one, in the background, waited suspiciously, with his four small hands holding down four levers, any one of which, if released, would flood all of them with a disintegrating omega-ray from a projecting-grid in the ceiling.

The big Centipede was twelve feet long and looked well able to take care of himself without any mechanical protection. Skott briefly indicated the false badge he wore on his articulated neck. "Armed Force Headquarters," he said. "Counter Intelligence." Then he added the significant words: "Extra-galactic Service."

The Thenoxian's glazed eyes were narrow. He looked at Skott's forged pass and recorded it. Then he hesitated. Skott felt a chill. He knew the big fellow wasn't satisfied. Skott's thought-filter must not be on full—or maybe it was *too* efficient. Maybe the *absence* of sub-conscious thoughts had alarmed the guard. Instantaneously Skott relaxed his control a very little and began to think about Sheila. When he got back to Earth, Sheila would be thrilled to hear about this. Her brown eyes would shine against her blonde hair, and—

**I**T WAS CLOSE. The big guard wavered. His eyes tried to pierce Skott's brain. He hesitated so long that the smaller Centipede at the omega-ray levers looked questioningly at him. Then he jerked his beady-eyed head.

Skott took a full breath as he slithered away, but the chlorine didn't seem to satisfy his lungs.

He controlled his ninety-six legs and went down the aisle. He knew they were watching him, and he forced himself to walk at exactly the right speed, counting like a metronome to himself

as the green gas swirled around him.

The distance to the door seemed to stretch out to infinity. He met a pair of roving guards. They examined his badge, recorded it, and went on. Skott felt that they, too, were minutely unsatisfied, but forced himself to maintain his pace.

If he should be stopped, they would first put him under an X-ray, and then it would be apparent instantly that he was no Centipede, because he had a heart where the Centipedes did not possess a blood-pumping organ at all.

Skott was half-way now. He was thankful the somaticists had been able to build tiny Gruttman shields into his body-covering. Otherwise the terrific radiation would have been fatal. He reached the end of the long aisle and drew a deep breath. He turned without hesitation to the right. His articulated body swung behind him. He reached the exact center of the door that had seemed so far away. He paused. He felt better. He had almost made it. He twisted his body into a tight curve that squeezed the pressure-plate on the geiger. He stood motionless until he felt a tiny click. Then he looked up.

Through the green gas two guards were staring at him. At almost the same instant a huge ball somewhere sounded a deep note. Instantaneously the great room erupted. His radar caught the high squeals that meant excitement from the Centipedes. Guards began to run. The Centipede workers stopped and raised their heads, their feelers quivering, their horny-covered eyes searching.

The two roving guards bore down on Skott. He shot into the door with all the force of his ninety-six legs. They used a lot of fuel but they could move him fast.

He came out into the next room and faced more guards. "Let no one

through!" he shouted at them. "Shouted" was his thought, but actually in a Centipede's voice it was only a high-pitched buzz. "There's an insurrection!" he said, and went straight across the room, out in the open. It was effective. He made it through the next doorway. And with variations of those speeches he made his way to the opposite side of the building without trouble.

It was a minor guard who caused trouble. Skott skidded around the last corner. He was gasping for breath. He skittered up to the elevator just as the guard came up from one side.

"It's a riot!" said Skott.

The guard was an oldtimer. "You're the one who seems to be excited," he said. "You better go up to the office with me."

SKOTT INDICATED his badge. "Counter Intelligence," he said. Then he added the words, "Extra-galactic Service."

But the guard was unimpressed. "Come into the office. I'll let the chief pass you."

Skott drew his old-fashioned plastic projectile-weapon. He fired it. There was a tremendous explosion and a flash of yellow light. It was obvious enough to anyone within sight or hearing, but if it should register on any sensitive instruments at all, it would wreck them.

The guard's head disappeared. The wall behind the guard, was suddenly splattered with bits of brown chitin and dark blue tissue. The Centipede's body began to flatten. Brown blood was oozing out of its neck. Skott slid the pistol back in the holster concealed between two articulated scales on the under part of his body, and rang for the elevator.

In an instant it slid up. The six-

inch-high door opened. He slithered inside. There was the operator, a guard, and eight or ten passengers. They started down. Then the guard spoke sharply. "Is something wrong in the hall?" He glanced at Skott.

Skott didn't hesitate. He had a cyanide bomb in his hand. He tossed it into the center of the elevator and held his breath while the guard reached for him.

The guard didn't touch him. He died quickly. It was an ideal spot for cyanide because it was enclosed. In a moment the floor was covered with flattened, lifeless bodies.

Skott snapped his built-in filter into position and began to breathe. The car was still going down. He saw the hundredth floor coming up. He held his Centipede finger on the driving-lever and prayed that this was an express. Otherwise it would stop automatically.

**I**T WAS. IT kept going down. Skott punched the button that he thought would stop it at the zero floor.

It stopped with a swish. The door opened. Skott slid out. Now there was nothing to do but run. He had no more cyanide bombs. A man's body was a limited place for concealment.

He snatched out the pistol and decapitated the two guards at the front. He ran through the low door. He didn't wait for the autowalk. He was down at the street and had shot his way through two more guards and was outside by the time the Centipedes began to boil out of a hundred doors along the ground.

If he could have, Skott would have grinned. He had shot his way out in legendary Western fashion, and the sheer audacity of his attack had carried him this far. Boldness plus an unfamiliar weapon.

But now the advantage of surprise

was gone. Now they were converging on him.

The raw chlorine was beginning to burn his lungs. He ran across the street. His heart was pounding when he reached the other side, and it was hard to keep his ninety-six feet synchronized, but he ducked into the doorway of an apartment burrow. This had been on his maps, too—maps that only eight hours before he had had plenty of time to study. Now there was no time for anything. He had to get far enough ahead so that he could use his escape gadget.

He went into the circular hallway and remembered his maps. At his left, azimuth two hundred and forty, the occupant was a lone male who would be away at work. He dived for the opening just as thousands of feet began to rattle up the incline.

At the end of the burrow was a big rock. Skott flattened himself and went under. There it was moist and cool. He flattened himself still more and jerked out his last gadget.

He doubled up, with his head at the entrance, to keep them off. He set the gadget on the floor and squeezed the handle. It would take perhaps two seconds to get it into operation.

The first Centipede raced into the room. He was a big fellow with a murderous glare in his eyes. He was the one whose two right arms were only bloody stumps. He didn't hesitate. He shot across the room and grabbed Skott's head with his two arms and began to pull. An instant later he was helped by others, as many as could put their under-size hands on Skott's head. They pulled, each four hands backed by the traction of ninety-six feet. Skott resisted. His body was wedged under the rock.

Then they began to twist. Skott squirmed desperately but the pain was

sharp. His eyes were pointing toward the floor. His mouth was toward the low ceiling. They were twisting his head off. His feet began to slip and he started coming slowly out of the burrow.

Then he saw a peculiar thing. Through his vision, inverted as it was, he saw a Centipede's face. It bore the same odd expression as the one he had met face to face in the pink cloud. It made an odd grimace with its mouth, and a weird siren began to shrill through the room. It almost stunned them. The big guard abruptly turned loose of Skott's head, for the siren was the one signal that every Thenoxian feared. It meant that free hydrogen was escaping into the chlorine atmosphere.

**SKOTT STARED** as they turned to run. Then he saw the one Centipede motion him back into the burrow, and he realized he had had help. He retreated under the rock just in time. The tiny fission machine was whirling, the Burton cathode was hot. Skott curled around it thankfully....

As he drifted into the pleasant embrace of the Muir field that hyperphysics students called the eighth dimension, he wondered what sort of entity had saved him. It seemed impossible that his helper itself could have escaped, but he wished that he could thank it.

Then the secrecy dimension was in full force. He was nauseated for a moment, especially when the Muir field gave way to the seventh or acceleration dimension. Then he remembered the odd, almost sacrificial look in the other agent's eyes, and it bothered him.

Presently he began to relax. The unpleasant effect was diminishing, and he knew the seventh-dimension Paige

converters were taking over and shunting him toward home and the Second Metagalaxy at a velocity that constantly approached but never quite equaled, the compound square of the speed of light.

He would soon be back in Tarazed, and he would have only to spend some time in the Somatoplastic Hospitals—False Face Factories, the agents called them—and get his body changed back to a human body, and get unconditioned mentally by the psycho-alienists, and then he could strike out for home—Earth.

He didn't know how long it would take them to get rid of his Centipede body. It had taken a year to build it up, but he hoped they could change him back more quickly. The surgeons were clever. Psychobiologists, they called themselves—half-plant, half-animal beings from Capella.

Now, with his work finished, the ache came into his arms, and abruptly he hated the Centipede body and every element of it. He disdained the ninety-six pattering legs; he loathed the horny chitin that encased him; he hated the smell of the chlorine that he would have to breathe until they got his lungs rehabilitated; he despised the puerile little arms and hands that dangled at his chest as if they were withered and tendonless, while his own arms ached with a pain that almost drove him frantic.

In the letdown after his escape, he was flooded with revulsion for his entire present body, and felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to step on it, as he had often stepped on the small, scurrying centipedes around the damp grounds of Sheila's summer home, for Sheila hated them and always screamed when she saw one and demanded that he kill it.

It seemed a long time since he had

been home. He wondered if Sheila would look at him the way she had looked at Jon Andrews when Jon got back from his five years with MI. Sheila was blonde, languid, and heavy-lidded. She had looked at Jon's space-bronze and had taken a deep breath. "Sit down, Jon," she had said, "and tell me about yourself. Where have you been since we got our diplomas?"

Jon was tall. He folded himself into an easy chair. "Out on Arneb with the Grasshoppers." He suppressed a yawn. "Very tiresome."

"Arneb!" Skott's eyes were shining. "I've never been away from Earth," he said in awe, "but you've been clear across the galaxy."

**S**KOTT HAD a responsible job in the bank. He was making eight hundred a month and was a "solid young man with a good future." But suddenly it was all overturned, and the dream he had suppressed as a small boy came back and overwhelmed him as a man.

Monotonous, Jon had said. But Jon could afford to say that now, for he had already traveled the space-warps and he had gone into ancient, far-away galaxies; he had submitted himself to the uncertainties and danger of interstellar travel. He had passed it and he was back, and now he could say casually, "Been out on Arneb," and pretend it wasn't exciting....

Three weeks later Skott went out to Sheila's. There was the usual weekend party. Sheila was lying on the warm pink sand in a white suit—what there was of it—next to Jon Andrews with his space-tan.

Skott had rather contemplated telling Sheila first—alone. But he waited two hours and then went for a walk on the beach. At sundown Sheila was still engrossed in metagalactic orienta-

tion, and Skott, somewhat impatient, went walking again. Wasn't he going to have a chance to tell anybody what he had done?

This time on the beach he met Ann Bennett. She was sitting on a big rock watching the moon. He sat beside her. She was a clerk at the bank and a distant relative of Sheila.

"You know," she said, "I was looking at the sky. I've never even been to the moon. Have you?"

"No," he admitted. He looked down at her as she stared at the moon again. She was very attractive in a melon-red bathing suit—what there was of it.

"Think of all the stars up there. I'd like to go to a star. Some people do," she said dreamily.

He looked at her. He was too filled with his thoughts to make an intelligent answer.

"How could one go to Vega?" she asked. "It must cost missions of dollars."

"Well," he said, no longer able to hold it, "you might go the way I'm going. I've joined the Metagalactic Intelligence."

He waited for the full impact of his statement to hit her. It did. He looked down at her, and this time she was looking up at him, and stars exploded in her eyes.

"Wonderful!" she said softly. There was no disbelief, no questioning. She accepted what he said at its face value. "Tell me about it."

"There's nothing to tell," he confessed. "I just always wanted to. Then I saw Andrews and heard him talk. I guess I kind of forgot myself. Anyway," he added, "they do need men in the MI."

"You don't have to defend yourself." Her voice was gentle. He looked at her and was encouraged.



"I had my physical this week," he said modestly.

"And you passed! Oh, Skott!"

He looked down at her and for a moment he thought she would have been pleased to have him kiss her. But he didn't. She, he thought, was a good example of how girls were overawed by space-glamor. He wouldn't take advantage of it. Ann was a nice kid. He knew her parents.

"I wish I could join the MI," she said wistfully.

"Why don't you?" His words were careless. "The MI uses woman agents too."

HE LEFT Earth on the giant interstellar liner *Pride of Altair*, and at Regulus in Leo he changed to a ship specially shielded for passage through the clouds of ionized calcium between Leo and Tarazed, in Aquila.

At MI headquarters on Tarazed III, he was taken over by Colonel Jarvg. He was given exhaustive tests and finally selected for the post of special agent. He was sent to Tarazed VI for special-service training, and it was there that he read one day in the Earth Section of the MI news, in the list of arrivals at headquarters, the name of Ann Bennett.

It astonished him mildly, for he'd never thought of her as the type. She had mentioned it but he had not for a moment thought she was serious. He'd like to see her, but she was a planet away and their lives were regulated now by MI. They probably would go into far different departments and be sent to opposite ends of the universe....

How fast things moved! Now all that was behind him and it was a matter of only a few more hours until he would be received at Communications headquarters on Tarazed X, then he

would go to XI for examination and extraction of every possible shred of information; while his precious photographs would go to Analysis on IV. Then he would get a long rest on XVIII while they re-made him into a man, and after that—well, a man or an entity who had accomplished one of those out-galactic missions, could have about anything he wanted....

He landed on X and went through the routine. By the time he got to the Hospital he was very much annoyed by the infernal bubble he had to wear to keep breathing chlorine. He was thankful when the half-plant surgeons took him over.

He awoke a month later, feeling wonderful. It was only when the Earth-nurse came in and went out ominously quiet, that he began to look around. But he saw nothing wrong. Then he remembered he was a man again. He could swing his arms!

He did. His first aim was to knock the vase of stargolds to the floor. Just from exuberance. He swung. But only a tiny, shriveled limb waved feebly in a short arc and went limp against his body.

Skott stiffened. He closed his eyes for a moment. Then he lay still for a while, afraid to move.

Eventually he opened his eyes, looked, and cringed. He was still covered with chitin.

He was still a Centipede....

He stayed in the hospital another month, three months, six months. He complained because they weren't making progress.

"It takes time," the surgeons told him. "You must be patient."

But Skott, hating the chitin that still covered his body, despising the shriveled arms that dangled at his chest, had little patience. And one day, after a long session under anesthetic, he

told them bitterly, "If you can't make me back into a man, why don't you say so? I can take it."

"Yes," said the old Capellan in his whispering voice. "You can—but *will* you?"

**A** WEEK LATER Skott was bundled into an ambulance ship and sent in to headquarters on IV. There Colonel Jarvg met him. He came out from behind his desk, balancing on his Kangaroo-tail, and gravely shook hands as well as he could.

"Glad to see you again, Skott," he said as Skott's tiny arm dropped limply. "Sit down—or relax."

But Skott didn't feel like relaxing. How could he relax as long as he had to walk on those ninety-six pattering legs, as long as he had only those feeble half-arms to shake hands with, while his own two strong arms ached unbearably to be released?

"The doctors tell me they're having a little trouble rebuilding your body," said Colonel Jarvg.

"That doesn't tell the story," Skott said harshly—but his voice was a grating buzz. "They aren't getting *anywhere*."

The colonel licked his Kangaroo-lips. "You know," he said, "the mind has a lot of influence in a delicate business like this. We don't deny that there's a lot about the effects of the Muir field that we don't understand—but you yourself can make it more difficult for the somatoplasticists by your attitude."

"I haven't interfered," Skott said shortly.

"No," said the colonel, "but remember this: no one should ever want anything to the point of feeling that he absolutely has to have it, because of course you don't *have* to have *anything*. And in this case, when you get

down to that bed-rock feeling that you can't endure your present state, you create such a state of tension in your body that it doesn't respond."

Skott took a deep breath of oxygen. "Well, okay, sir. I'll behave. I'll change my attitude," he said resignedly, and then added, "I'm sorry, sir, that you had to bring me all the way to IV to tell me that." He was honestly penitent. "I'll go back and work with them, sir. You don't have to worry about me any more."

**T**HE COLONEL looked at him a long time through his soft Kangaroo eyes. He looked at him so long that Skott got a queer feeling. At last the colonel spoke gravely. "I'm sorry, Skott. I'm afraid it's too late for that. They have discharged you as incurable under present knowledge."

Skott stared at him. "Incurable?" he said hoarsely—but it turned into a rasping sound.

"Only so under their present knowledge," the colonel reminded him.

Skott felt suddenly weak. The full impact of the colonel's words flooded over him. "Incurable." "Discharged." *That meant they were through with him.*

He felt sick. His arms, molded into the flesh of his body now for over a year, ached with unbearable torment. He tried to free them, to break them lose by the sheer strength of his muscles. He strained—but his revolting little Centipede arms only dangled a little at his chest.

The colonel was by him. He stooped down and put a hand on Skott's neck. "Take it easy, boy," he said. "I don't want to call the M. P.'s."

Skott started to shout at him, then he got control of himself.

"I'll give you a session with the Mind-men," the colonel said. "And

take off a year at full pay. Make a visit home. Then come back. Perhaps there will be developments. Research is working on problems like this all the time, you know."

Skott stumbled out. He was going to be a Centipede all his life. His ninety-six legs didn't seem to be of much use to him. His eyes, even though they had been restored to Earth usefulness, seemed clouded. His breath came hard, and he was grateful that they had at least taken the thing out of his lungs so he could breathe oxygen again.

He started downstairs, not wanting to take the elevator. But he forgot he wasn't a man and couldn't negotiate normal steps. He fell at the first one and rolled down, his long, articulated body sliding over the steps to the bottom. There he doubled up and skidded into a corner, and lay there until the attendants picked him up....

He took a month at the rest center on Tarazed V. He took two months, three months. The Mind-men from Yed Prior, in Ophiuchus took over. Their tremendous mental power was given full play—a thing that seldom happened—but such was Skott Stevens' repugnance of his own body and his resistance to what had happened to him that he sucked in all of their healing force but refused to assimilate it.

He was lying in a dark, damp corner, flat on the floor and listless, on the day the director came in. The director was a Capellan major. He looked like a big bare oak tree, with a thick body and hundreds of limbs, each of which had a brain in its tip. The psychobiologist towered over Skott. Skott hated him. It was the Capellans who had made him into a Centipede. He scurried to the opposite corner.

The Capellan jerked back, but the

Mind-Man said, "It's all right, sir. He is not equipped with venom."

**SKOTT CRINGED.** They thought of him only as a Centipede—not as a man.

The major said, "Thanks. Can you add anything to your final report?"

The Mind-man, an elongated brain with minor limbs and great, penetrating eyes, said thoughtfully: "I'm not sure, except that he doesn't *want* to get well. The strange thing is that he isn't ready to die yet, either. He just lies in that corner and fights. Fights what?" the Mind-man asked helplessly. "He doesn't fight anything. That's the difficult part. He won't accept his condition, but he won't ask for euthanasia. He's a very strange character. How did he ever get into the MI in the first place."

The Capellan said wisely, "That's not uncharacteristic of Earth-men. They're like children, you know—they don't really bow to the inevitable as do most inhabitants of the Fourth Universe. It may be plain enough, but you can't convince them. This fellow will die, still fighting. He's fighting because the hope is still there. They never give up, even in the face of insuperable odds. Coming from your part of the IV Universe," he said thoughtfully, "you find that hard to understand. And so do I, in a way. Earthmen are one of the few entities who have that characteristic of survival so overwhelmingly strong."

The Mind-man said, "Do you have any suggestions?"

"One," said the major. "These Earth-people have a very strong attachment for their own planet—for any place to which they feel they belong. Home—they call it. His own house might be home, or his own city, or continent, or his own galaxy."

"Very strange," murmured the Mind-man.

"CLOSELY associated with the element of loyalty. He'd fight *us* if we invaded his planet, but he'd fight *for* us if you invaded our Solar System, and he'd fight for you if Thenox, for instance, invaded this metagalaxy. I believe the record shows, in fact, that he was a special agent on Thenox—hence the Centipede's body. Also, he'd turn around and fight for the Hundred and Seventh Metagalaxy if they were invaded by, say, the Third Universe."

"Sort of a soldier of fortune?"

"Decidedly not." The Capellan's limbs were still for an instant. "Quite the opposite. There are some good books on Earth psychology in the library. One especially by Rillattall—if you read Capellan."

"Glad to," murmured the Mind-man. "But you were about to suggest—"

"Let's send this fellow home. That word is magic to an Earth-man. It might do something for him."

And so, two weeks later, Skott Stevens in his centipede body slunk out of the freight-lock on the *Pride of Altair* and took a closed taxi to a small hotel on the outskirts of New York—a place that catered to alien entities, where he could hope to attract little attention. It was about the only thing for which he did hope. He saw Earth-people on the sidewalk stare at him and draw back when he slithered over the door-sill of the taxi, and his fears were confirmed. He didn't dare go out on the street for a walk. He'd stay in his room and have his meals sent up.

If there had been another planet where Centipedes were entities, he would have gone there, but the truth was that there was no world in all the

Second Metagalaxy where a centipede-like ruling or sentient race had developed. He was an outcast in his own metagalaxy.

It would have helped a little if he could have known that his work had been useful, but there was no way of finding out a thing like that from MI. And Skott thought skeptically that probably his work was just one of thousands of missions that would be tossed aside, almost as they had shipped him out of the Somatoplastic Hospital.

He didn't go out of the door for a week. But that time he was half-angry. He had a taxi-driver take him to the country for a ride. A few days later he got out of the taxi and took a walk.

The sunshine and fresh air helped him to relax. He began to think that life wouldn't be too bad if he only had a human being to talk to occasionally. During the following week he tried. The only ones who would talk to him were crackpots. The others edged away. He supposed they felt ludicrous, leaning over to talk down to a repulsive, overgrown insect.

A man couldn't live in solitude forever. He decided to see Sheila. She always had been a good listener. He wrote a letter, explaining all that had happened, and his predicament, and asked her to see him.

A week went by without an answer. Skott's bitterness grew at first, but then it gave way to sheer loneliness. He didn't try to get in touch with her again, but he thought that if he could just see some of his old friends from a distance it would help. . . . So that evening he was crawling along on his hundred legs under a hedge, careful to keep his twisting body, eight feet long and as thick as a man's torso, in the shadow.

THE LIGHTS came on in the garden. Sheila came strolling hand in hand with a man in a Space Patrol uniform. "When are you leaving?" she asked in her old calculating way, and even that made Skott feel warm all over.

"Tomorrow night," the man said.

"Where do you go from here?"

"Scuttlebutt says we're off to find Meenak, wherever that is, but there's nothing official."

Skott did not mean to show himself, but the mention of Meenak was something he had heard before. Meenak was supposed to be the source of Thenox VIII's fission material. Skott was interested. He raised his head to see the Space Patrolman more clearly.

He had known he would frighten Sheila if he appeared suddenly, and he had not intended to be seen, but he must have been careless. He heard a scream. He moved—and heard another.

Then there was confusion. Men running heavily, girls screaming in shrill voices. Skott was in the open, running for his life. They cornered him. He ran into a dead-end and was surrounded by a high stone wall. He started up, using the tactile pads on his feet. But a sun-tanned young giant in a bathing suit swung a softball bat against his head and knocked him off of the rocks.

He fell hard, but he picked himself up and squirmed over on his stomach. His ninety-six legs pattered madly. He darted down a path. If he could only find an opening so that he could crawl under the house, or a big rock to slip under. That was it—a rock.

He remembered the granite boulder that Sheila's father had left in the middle of the garden. There had been children digging a cave under it, once long ago, and Skott felt sure he could

flatten his body and slip under it long enough to stop pursuit so he could talk to them and tell them who he was.

The bronze young giant was thundering after him, swinging the club.

Skott doubled and skittered heavily through a patch of great cosmos. But his body was too big. The cosmos didn't hide it. He shot across the grass, and a heavy rock struck him in the side. It knocked the last half of his body off of its feet, and he dragged it a few yards before he got it straightened out.

He would have given a lot to have the use of his arms for a moment. He would have taken the club away from the young fellow and thrown it into the bay.

He curved around the corner of the house. A man and a girl were running toward him along the side of the open-air porch. He shot up over the low wall, flattened his body and squeezed in under the railing around the porch. He ran from their screams and yells and his feet slipped on the tile blocks while people converged on the porch from everywhere.

In the middle of the porch he paused. The rock had hit him in a bad spot, and the latter half of his body was getting numb. The side of his head ached where the club had struck. His vision in that eye was getting fuzzy. He saw the front door of the house start to open, and then he knew what to do.

He had to get inside. While he was in the open he had no chance. Inside, perhaps—

HE DARTED for the door. Then he stopped. Cold. For coming out were Sheila and the man. Sheila stared at him and her languid blue eyes bulged. She shrieked.

Skott backed a step. He ignored the



converging enemies. He looked at Sheila and said as softly as his vox-grid would let him, "Sheila, it's Skott. I'm Skott Stevens. Don't you know me? Please, Sheila, tell them it's me."

He expected her to shout at them to let him alone, but in his anxiety he talked too loud, and his voice was a harsh buzz. Sheila's mouth worked and finally she whispered in horror, "A centipede! Kill it, please."

The young man pulled a pistol from his pocket. Skott pleaded. "Sheila!" But still there was too much intensity in his voice and it didn't sound human.

She showed her loathing. "Kill it," she said to the young man.

The young man pointed the pistol and fired. The bullet cut a gash across Skott's back as he twisted and ran. He went down the low steps, scattering screaming girls before him, and the abruptness of his charge got him in the clear. A few moments later, aching from his wounds, breathless from his flight, and unutterably disillusioned, he peered out from a clump of salt-grass at the edge of the beach and then made his way out onto the sand.

The moon was coming up. His ninety-six legs made a queer twisting track in the sand. There was no place in all the metagalaxy for a man with a Centipede's body. There was no one anywhere for him to talk to. He was only an insect to be exterminated.

Ahead of him, toward the rising moon, he heard odd, rustling footsteps. Many of them, like a large group. But no voices. He dodged to the grass at the upper side of the sand. A moment later, silhouetted in the moonlight, he saw a great Centipede almost as large as himself. For an instant he stared.

His first impulse was to attack it. He thought the Thenoxians had somehow traced him and come for revenge. But there was something different about it.

It came slowly, questingly. Then a voice from its vox-grid called, "Skott! Skott Stevens!"

Skott caught his breath. Incredible, he said something—he didn't know what.

"Don't be alarmed," the voice said. "I've come after you."

There was something hauntingly familiar about the voice, but it defied him. He took a step into the open, and they faced each other. "Don't you remember me?" the voice asked. "Don't you remember the night we stood on this beach and you told me you were going to join the Intelligence?"

He stared at her. "Ann! Ann Bennett!" he whispered.

She laughed softly. "Thanks for remembering."

He couldn't believe it. "How—you—I—"

"I went in too, when you did, or shortly after. Didn't you know?"

"Yes, I—" Then it hit him. "Ann—you went to Thenox. You were the other agent, the one who helped me get away," he said in awe.

"I ASKED for that assignment," she admitted, her eyes watching his. "I wanted to be sure that someone would be there on whom you could depend."

"Well—" He was having trouble breathing oxygen, now. "How did you get away?"

"That's a long story, Skott. I'll tell it to you later. We'll have a lot of time together, because we're the only two Centipedes in the galaxy. That is, unless—maybe you—" She was quite confused. Skott could imagine her blushing.

He looked down at her in the moonlight. Perhaps only a man in his unique position could have seen in her chitin-

ous body a lovely, soft-curved, black-haired girl.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I've been looking for you, Skott. I wanted to tell you something. I have a message for you from Colonel Jarvg."

His eyes burned into hers. "Yes?"

"He said I should tell you to come back, Skott. They have found out how to nullify the Muir effect, so we can have our own bodies back again."

"How did they work that out?" The answer hit him hard. He broke off.

"I've been in Research for the last year," she said simply, and her mouth moved so that he thought it was a smile. "I was a regular piece of laboratory equipment."

"I guess so," he said wonderingly. "After I ran away, you were one of the few in the Universe they could experiment on. It must have been pretty rough."

She shrugged her full length. "I got paid for it. Anyway, what else was there to do?"

He looked at her with new admiration.

"Colonel Jarvg said I should tell you," she went on, "that the mission

to Thenox was eminently successful. They have analyzed the radioactive material as curium, and they are sending an expedition out to locate Meenak. Armed force headquarters on Terebellum sent a message of congratulation to MI headquarters, and there's a medal for you, Skott."

"What about you?" he asked.

She looked at him. "I'll get my reward," she said confidently.

He felt better, now that he knew his work had been useful, but a thought struck him. "If they figured out how to counteract the Muir effect, why haven't they changed you?" he asked sharply.

He could see her swallow. "Suppose they had—and then something unforeseen had happened to keep them from changing you. You know how these metaphysical things are. Maybe by the time they could find you it would be too late, and then you would be alone, Skott, the only Centipede in the galaxy." She looked away. "I wanted to be sure you'd have a friend, Skott."

He moved closer. She looked up. He held her as tightly as he could. She sighed gratefully. Then he said, "I'd give a lot for two good arms to put around you, Ann."

She answered dreamily, "I can wait."

THE END

# PRISON ON LUNA

By

Lee Owen

"WILSON," Colonel Breckinridge said to the young engineer at his side, "you're looking at a sight I never expected to see." He cursed bitterly and his lips set themselves into a thin white line.

"They're volunteers, sir," O'Keefe replied. "So what if they are prisoners?"

Breckinridge whirled on him: "What kind of people are we? Building the Lunar Base with prison 'volunteers'! I thought

men would fight for a chance like this. Work on the Moon! The U. S. Lunar Base Command forced to use reprieved prisoners—the thing's ridiculous."

The two men were watching the disembarking of the twenty space-suited figures from an aluminum-surface hut. The No. 4 shuttle rocket had just brought them up. The men coming into the "tun-

(Cont'd On Page 148)



# THE CLUB HOUSE

By Rog Phillips

AT THE WORLD Science Fiction Convention held in Chicago last Labor Day, one item on the program was a debate between Willy Ley and Ray Palmer on the nature of the flying saucers. Willy was inclined to the belief that they are a natural phenomenon—possibly reflections from temperature-inversion layers of air. Ray—perhaps for a gag—predicted they would be found to be alive. Living forms of gaseous structure or something, I suppose he meant.

Everyone seems to be advancing theories about the flying saucers. I may have, myself, and forgotten about it now. There are at least two societies in existence that gather data and try to coordinate it, in an attempt to determine the nature of that sky mystery. The airforce seems to be very aware of it. The "flying saucers" over Washington D.C. caused quite a furor. Whether they were blips on the radar or something else, at least they caused some excitement.

The only thing I have seen, myself, was a slowly descending streak of fire with a large head to it. I was driving along the coast highway south of Los Angeles. I noted the time and direction. It was evening, and I saw it approximately in the southeast. The next day in the paper it was reported that two men in a plane in Mexico had seen the same thing. The time was the same, to the minute.

It was definitely not a flying saucer. Its altitude must have been considerable, and it must have been quite

large. I am sure it was not travelling as fast as a falling star. I've watched too many shooting stars.

And now to the fanzines and the last reviews that Rog Phillips will write for *Amazing*.

\* \* \*

RHODOMAGNETIC DIGEST: 25¢: Don Fabun, 2524 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley 4, California. "Published by the Elves', Gnomes' and Little Men's Science Fiction, Chowder and Marching Society." You have to hand it to the Little Men. They wanted the convention for 53, and saved up their money so they could rent a penthouse suite at the hotel during the fifty two convention. It cost a hundred dollars a day to do that. That they didn't get the bid wasn't their fault, they tried. They worked hard.

They work hard on their fanzine too, and it's almost certainly the best that has ever been published, from the standpoint of technical layout. It tops *Gorgon* (no longer published), which was in my opinion the previous all time great.

There are seventy-six interior pages, plus a cover similar to the one on this copy of *Amazing Stories*. It's too bad they neglected to give the name of the artist responsible for the cover illustration. It's very good, and in three colors.

The contents? For a magazine that comes out ten times a year there must be a lot of people that spend most of their time on it. Take Andrew Gregg's article, "Some Editors Say." He sent a questionnaire to twenty sf editors to fill out. Five of them filled it out. In just three of the seventy-six pages of this issue he reports on what they say concerning fandom and editing and writers and fanzines.

I was startled to learn that one of the pet peeves of one editor is stories with the plot of the man who is dead all the time and doesn't know it. That does bring up an interesting thing though. We have western stories with the plot of good and bad hombres riding animals called horses, and revolving around the problems of raising other animals called cattle. If there had been no wild west, and that plot were pure fantasy, it would be good for perhaps half a dozen stories a year in as many different magazines. Because the idea of a

man who is dead all the time and doesn't know it is pure fantasy, even though it offers an inexhaustible variety of variations, it can't be used over and over again. There are many such veins in the lode of science fiction and fantasy.

There are sixteen pages of pictures and descriptions of the latest rockets and guided missiles. Quite a collection, and with superb reproduction. "Life in the Universe," by Gary Nelson, takes seven pages to review the usual analysis of how life originated, and predict that there must be many other planets in the universe with life on them—perhaps intelligent life on a par with the human. He does come up with some aspects I'd never heard of.

Don Fabun in his editorial discusses time capsules. There are quite a few of them buried here and there.

Altogether you'll find this zine gives many hours of interesting reading. And if you live in the Frisco area you might want to attend a meeting of the Little Men. For meeting dates contact anyone at Garden Library, 2524 Telegraph Ave. in Berkely.

\* \* \*

**JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT:** sample copy and information on membership in the Chicago Rocket Society on request. Chicago Rocket Society, 10630 S. St. Louis Ave., Chicago, Illinois. There is the regular department, "Rocket Abstracts" which gives brief items of interest to rocket enthusiasts culled from dozens of trade journals and other magazines. There are two articles, one of them a factual analysis of "Ascent From Earth," by Lewis Grant, Jr. This article starts in with a discussion of the problems of attaining escape velocity, then settles into the problems of establishing a satellite station which would circle the earth at an altitude of 174 miles, at which altitude it would circle the earth in ninety minutes.

The second article, by J. England, discusses the final end or destruction of life in the universe, based on current theories about the universe—exploding universe that started a finite number of years ago. One statement highlights the article. "It need not have an end at all, although it apparently did have a beginning, and things would seem much more logical if it had an end as well."

Something new is developing in the rocket societies. It's the International Astronautical Federation. It seems all the major Rocket Societies are affiliating with it into one gigantic group. The American group is being organized by the Pacific Rocket Society and is to be called the American Astronautical Association, to include all possible American groups.

If you live near Chicago you should attend a meeting of the CRS. They are an active and likeable group. You will find that their interests aren't exclusively rockets. Every scientific aspect of problems we will encounter on other planets

interests them. And they have a good time just being people, too!

\* \* \*

#### **PACIFIC ROCKET SOCIETY BULLETIN:**

For information concerning the Pacific Rocket Society and its bulletin, write to the secretary, Marie Leyh, 8304 E. 7th St., Downey, Calif. The meeting place of the PRS is at 428 S. Verdugo Rd., Glendale 5, Calif.

The PRS has the advantage over the Chicago group and the Detroit group, because it's next door to huge desert areas where it can do actual experimental work with rockets. And it does. It has a large grounds out in the desert. When the club is going to try out another rocket, the members make an overnight trip of it. If you live in the Los Angeles area and want to attend one of the open meetings of the PRS, you can find out about them by calling Freddy Curtis, Citrus 4-2813, Glendale. She'll give you the information.

My wife, Mari Wolf, is quite enthusiastic about this group. She has attended one of their open meetings, and plans to go with the group on their next desert trip. And she has an article in the current bulletin which I, ahem, think is the most interesting article in it.

R. S. Richardson, billed in the blurb as a noted astronomer, is author of an article on space stations. This article is from a different angle than the one in the Journal of Space Flight. It discusses the possibility of natural satellite already circling the earth a few hundred miles up. If there were one we could latch onto it and convert it into a space station. However, Mr. Richardson thinks the prospects of there being one are pretty slim, though not impossible.

I've reviewed these two rocket societies together. There are others I don't have the data on. I'm sure that either the CRS or the PRS can give you the dope on the rocket society nearest you if you are interested. And certainly, the rocket societies seem very interesting. A facet of the stf field that is trying to make something from fantasy become a reality!

\* \* \*

**FANTASY-TIMES:** 10¢; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave, Flushing 54, N. Y. A bi-weekly newsmagazine specializing in news of interest to stf fans. You'd be surprised how much happens every two weeks in fandom and the pro fields. Most interesting news report in the issue on hand for review is by Jean Cox on what the clergy has to say on the possibility of intelligent beings from other planets being on the flying saucers. Surprisingly, leaders in all denominations he contacted are much more ready to admit the possibility of such aliens than the scientists themselves. We've come

a long ways from the days when it was heresay to deny that the earth was the center of the universe!

Regular features of F-T are stf film reviews and reports on new stf films, reports on what to expect in the prozines next month, new developments in the field such as new magazines and books, what authors and editors are doing, and a million things about fandom. You shouldn't be without Fantasy-Times!

\* \* \*

**PEON:** 10¢; Charles Lee Riddle, 108 Dunham St., Norwich, Connecticut, "with the able assistance of John Ring." Mr. Riddle is a navy officer. He started his fanzine when he was stationed in Hawaii, in order to win friends and influence people. He made lots of friends, too. Last year when he was transferred to New York he and his family drove from Los Angeles to New York, visiting many of those friends along the way. The contents page shows the result of such a friendship campaign. Henry Moskowitz, Jim Harmon, Terry Carr, T. E. Watkins... You can put out a good fanzine with material like that.

"We Are Fished For," by P. H. Economou (never heard a name like that before. Is it Esquimou?) is a bizarre little story of the Fortean type.

"The Dreamless," by Howard Donnell is a story that brings up an interesting speculation. If mechanical or robot or eletronic brains ever become equal to ours, will they have dreams?

"It's like this..." by Larry Saunders has the same title as a story of mine appearing in another magazine currently. But there the similarity ends, because this is an article on fantasy poetry, which Larry seems to take for granted is despised by all fans, and liked by no one but the poets who wrote it. I dunno...

That's only a starter. There are thirty-two pages of articles and fiction. You'll read every page, because every page is worth reading. And you'll want to subscribe to Peon, and maybe even get acquainted with Mr. Riddle.

\* \* \*

**OOPSLA:** published every six weeks. No subscription price is listed for a single copy, but 15¢ should cover it. Subscription price is one dollar per year for eight regular issues and an annual. Gregg Calkins, 761 Oakley St., Salt Lake City 16, Utah.

Current issue contains mostly news and views of the convention at Chicago in September, all interesting, since they are fan's-eye views, from Ken Beale's factual report to Shelby Vick's assertion that the Nolacon was infinitely better.

The fannish art in Oopsla is always tops. I enjoy it as much as the stories and articles, and wish more fanzines had it. And

just above the best stf cartoon of the issue is the notice that since September is the month of the Jackpot (the time that "Year of the Jackpot" by Heinlein says the sun would nova and destroy the earth) this should be the last issue. By now, though, I think everyone is convinced the earth and its peoples are still in existence, so Gregg will no doubt continue to publish Oopsla, and its readers will continue to get enjoyment from its pages. Why don't you?

\* \* \*

**ETRON:** 25¢; Chuck Taylor, 1521 Mars, Lakewood 7, Ohio. "Published every 73 days by the Extra-terrestrial Research Organization." Forty-eight pages of articles and stories. Most interesting in the issue is "Experiment in Hypnotism" by Jim Parry. All I have to say on the experiment is that, if it's a factual account and not a fantasy, it was done very recklessly, and experiments of that type are very dangerous to the subject. It was probably a story—I hope...

ETRO is concerned mainly with study of flying saucers in an attempt to find out what they are and where they come from. An article by Phil Rasch on the subject concludes that "The fact that flying discs have been sighted all over the world, but especially over the United States, strongly counts against any attempt to explain them as secret weapons of the U.S. or U.S.S.R."

"Atomic Energy for the Layman," by A. Bahnsen is something you should read. The whole fanzine, for that matter. It's really on the ball.

\* \* \*

**THE CARTOONZINE:** 5¢; monthly; Marian Cox, 79th A.B. Sq., Sioux City, Iowa. Here's a fanzine full of cartoons, nothing else, all of them fantastic or science-fictional and all of them funny. For instance, there's the one of the mother rabbit telling the facts of life to junior. "A magician pulled you out of a hat. Now hush!" Or maybe you like the captionless kind, such as the one about the Terran and the alien, each with a claim sign, arguing wildly over who's going to get the asteroid or whatever it is they both want.

There are several different fan artists represented in this first issue, most of them identified only by initials. Whoever JRN is, he—or she—has some wonderfully funny characterizations. Marian Cox announces that cartoon contributions will be welcomed with open arms, so if you feel like drawing up some outworldish situation, send it in. Or if you have cartoon ideas but can't draw, send them in anyway and they'll be farmed out.

In any case, if you want to get a lot of chuckles for only a nickel, have Marian send you the Cartoonzine.



\* \* \*

**SHANGRI-LA:** 25¢; quarterly; Forrest J. Ackerman, 915 S. Sherbourne Dr., Los Angeles 35, Calif. Jim Wilson edits this issue of the official organ of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, or LASFS. You'll find here a rather large proportion of articles dealing directly with science fiction as a field—trends in story types, characterizations, analyses of a writer's work, etc.

For example, Dave Fox's article "The Humanoids" points out the trend that has taken place in recent years to eliminate BEMs and non-human intelligent life from the science fictional scene, and to replace them either with Man, himself or with manlike forms. The simplest way to accomplish this supremacy-of-homo-sapiens theme is, of course, to have the story open with Man having already conquered the galaxy and wiped out any competing forms that may have been there. Or perhaps to have Man be the *only* intelligent animal ever to have developed at all.

Maturity equals anthropocentricity?

In the Drawn and Quartered department, there's Jim Wilson's personality sketch of longtime fan and co-founder of LASFS, Forry Ackerman, he of the enormous collection of s-f books and magazines. Three garages full, wasn't it, before he moved to Beverly Hills, where there's more storage space indoors? It's a good review of one of the real personalities in the field—and did you know that Forry was associate editor of the first fanzine, *Time Traveler*?

\* \* \*

**MOTE:** 5¢; bimonthly; Robert Peatrowsky, Box 634, Norfolk, Nebraska. I wonder if Robert chose the title of this fanzine just so he could have an editorial feature titled Re:Mote? Then there's Dick Clarkson's column "Glom," subtitled "the nondescriptive column" and called "Glom" because, as Dick says, he couldn't dream up any other word that was *less* descriptive of anything. But "Glom" is certainly informative. In this issue Dick talks about Project Fanclub, Orville Mosher's ambitious booklet which will thoroughly investigate the subject of s-f fanclubs. When the Project is completed there will be complete, concise information as to the formation and upkeep of a fan club, available in booklet form to all clubs and to all people interested in starting new clubs. A really ambitious undertaking.

Then there's Terry Carr's story, "Man Was a Rat." In this case the title is true, literally. Man *was*. Because the story is about a rat named Man and how he went to the Moon, and what he and the man (no capital, because this man was a man) found there....

You'll certainly get your nickel's worth here.

\* \* \*

That's all the fanzines. Jim Webert, the fan with the ready cigarette lighter and the unquenchable spirit of friendliness, dropped me a line the other day congratulating me on battling a thousand on convention predictions. I predicted Philly would get the bid for the fifty-three convention. I also predicted I would be ill. It was really Hannes Bok who predicted the illness. His hobby is astrology and has he got me tagged!

Having been so successful at predicting where the convention site would be, maybe I should predict who will be our next President. But the way I see it at this date, a week before November fourth, a ny prediction would be just a pure guess. I heard a line of reasoning just last night on the radio that shows how confused it is. There are several states where MacArthur is on the ballot. The race is so close that if MacArthur carried one state neither of the leading candidates could probably get a majority. Then it would be thrown into the House Of Representatives, and they could pick their man.

And, as I understand the law, that man could be anyone. One thing I'm sure of, it won't be me. I don't want the job. Too tough. The job, I mean...

—ROG PHILLIPS

# READ FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

## NOW ON THE STANDS

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(Cont'd From Page 143)

nels" were plain ordinary prisoners, riff-raff and scum from a Federal prison, given a new lease on life—they'd all been lifers—by the chance of forced labor on the Lunar Base Project. No inducements were enough to get men up there, since already forty men had died in the project. Working Lunar rock and pumice was dangerous and uncertain and the techniques were slowly being worked out, each meter of tunnel costing its measure in blood and sacrifice. Rock falls, tunnels collapsing, tunnels blowing, ejecting their workers into vacuum—it was a heart-breaking affair.

Authorities on Earth were crying out against "the slaughter" and private and public officials were lending their weight to the opposition of Lunar Base in spite of its obvious necessity. The result was that it was simply impossible to entice many men—especially with skills—for the project of installing the Lunar Base. As a last resort the U. S. Lunar Base Command had appealed to the Federal Prisons and "lifers" were being given a chance to expiate their crimes with a two-year labor period—if they lived.

The prisoners were put to work at once. Essentially their job was rock-working—it was tunnel-driving on a fantastically difficult scale, since everything had to go through airlocks for disposal, power was limited, and the "lunain" wasn't really known.

The definite leader of the prisoners was a tall, muscular Irishman—inevitably "Blackie"—and in the beginning, he worked well. The prisoner gangs which by now had increased to eighty men worked their shifts the clock around, obeyed the technical orders, and did a skillful job—all had some acquaintance with mining techniques. Blackie himself had come out of the West Virginia mines, and the transition to the weird Lunar position did not affect his skills a bit.

Colonel Breckinridge was whistling a different tune a week after the prisoners had been brought up and the work was progressing with surprising speed and effectiveness. He thought of the men as "his boys" and so referred to them, a change of heart which O'Keefe did not fail on more than one occasion to call to his attention.

The prisoner-workers were by no means white angels. Realizing their privileged position, their remoteness from immediate punishment, they at first tried to take advantage of the situation, but Breckinridge was no amateur and his immediate reaction soon took the starch out of any ideas they may have had of running things. Lunar Base Project was working—with reprieved prison labor.

Breckinridge, O'Keefe and three engineer had gone into the number three

tunnel for a survey and check-up of the bore which was soon to be used for fuel storage and equipment. Number one tunnel was already in use as mess, sleeping and office quarters. This, incidentally, made any sort of rigid discipline ridiculous and the artificial barriers of prisoner-keeper were simply absurd. Everyone was "a man on the Moon"—and that was all.

The five men went into the tunnel—and they didn't come out!

A previously planted charge still remained in the roof of the twenty-foot bore—some said it was a radar pulse which set it off—and the section came down, effectively locking in and trapping five men in a two-hundred-foot tunnel. They'd have air for a while—and then....

Blackie and seven men came into the central mess tunnel at the sound of the accidental blast. One look at the rock-curtained hole, and they knew what had happened.

"How many men?" Blackie asked Goldstein, the communications man. White-faced, he replied, "Five—I think. Including Breckinridge."

Immediately they went to work. It was straight pick-and-shovel work too, for the vibrations of a compressor and a drill couldn't be trusted not to bring down more of the tunnel, which hadn't been cement-faced along any of its length. Explosives naturally were out.

They got an opening through. They knew Breckinridge and his men were alive, since they'd been in sonic communication, but as the air pressure dropped slowly through a jar-leak and the air worsened as the oxygen was used up, the replies finally ceased until there was only a chance that the men were alive.

Blackie didn't hesitate to be the first man through the hole. The thought that the rest of the tunnel might be sensitized to collapse at a jar never even entered his head. He went in and brought out the men, one by one, although by this time he was half dead from fatigue too.

It took Breckinridge a lot of conniving and communicating with rank over the micro-wave link, but when he finished, the distinction between workers and "volunteer prison labor" on the Lunar Base were finished. Full and equal rights were immediately restored to the tunnelers and Lunar Base went on.

When you look at today's gigantic Lunar Installations, you don't often think about the fact that a gang of prison volunteers made it possible—in the beginning at least—but there is a small plaque that commemorates the fact. It's hard to believe that Luna was once too dangerous to attract more adventurous men than a few—and prison volunteers!

# Mercurian Pendulum

By  
Dee Arlen

I WENT THROUGH the Mercurian Pendulum.

Let me say that again: I went through the Mercurian Pendulum.

It sounds like a simple enough statement, and you're tempted to lean back and reach for another drink. So what? He went through the Pendulum. That's some hole on Mercury; they had a write-up on that a couple of months ago in *The Space-men's Journal*. Good, but...

Let me tell about it. As much as the thought of it gives me nightmares, with some sort of perverse fascination I can't help but think about it.

It was only two years ago. Atomics were just being shoved into rockets then, and men started—finally—to spread out over the Solar System like a handful of fine sand. I was with Patrol then too, and the first assignment our boat drew was the Mercurian visit. As soon as the ship rolled from the outfitting yards, they began shoving equipment and scientific apparatus aboard her—including a half dozen scientists, long-hairs who didn't know an injector-steerer from a basic cadmium pile. For most of these guys it was an exploratory lark with interest and honor thrown in—we could use constant acceleration too so they didn't have to worry about gravity.

The trip was as dead as anything you'd want, with exceptional flashes of thrill occasionally when you'd glance out through a leaded port and see that enormous disc of the Sun, so incredibly bigger than you'd imagine anything could be. Through the almost opaque leaded quartzite that monster still flamed unbearably brilliant.

The *Lorraine III* made the trip without incident. With atomics it was like floating a canoe on a Terran lake. When atomics came into rocketry, half the danger went out—and all of the discomfort. After all you can't really get the feel of space until you've spent a few weeks steady, in "free-fall." That separates the men from the boys!

The landing on Mercury went off simply too. There's no point in describing that God-forsaken hole either. It's simply beyond words. Just imagine a piece of hell brought to the Sahara desert, the Sun lowered right on top of it—and that's Mercury.

The planet is a flaming hell of barren craggy mountains, of molten lakes of tin and lead. It's mineral rich and the scientists had a field day.

One morning—ship's time—I drew Doc Yeager, an anthropologist, for my party and he and I suited up, went through the airlock into a scooter and decided on a hundred kilometer run to a low range of hills, visible from the peak on which the *Lorraine III* rested.

"Doc," I said as we skimmed low over the Hades beneath us, "you're crazier than I am. Why are you here? You know nothing can live in this heat."

He grinned under the scooter shade. "You're right Mike," he admitted, "but maybe something once did live here. That's what I'm looking for. Any trace at all of life—ever."

"That's possible," I admitted grudgingly. "Maybe sometime in the past. Maybe the planet even had a larger orbit. Who knows?"

"I'm not very hopeful, to be honest with you. Lancing thinks that too. But it's still an interesting trip."

My suit was already floating in sweat. "Yeah," I agreed cynically.

Suddenly Doc rapped my shoulder. "Look over there Mike," his voice said excitedly through the phones. I looked.

Like a pill box set sand hollow, a perfectly symmetrical structure was below and to our right. It was difficult to see because it blended perfectly with the black-red terrain and its surface was roughened and eroded—as if it could be anything but in this "climate."

I put the scooter's nose down and we pulled up to a smooth spot a short distance away. It was just that, a circular building about three hundred meters in diameter. Entrances existed on its surface every fifty meters or so. It stood about fifty meters high and by any standards it was impressive. It just occurred to me that we were gazing at human handiwork—well, the handiwork of living beings of some sort, anyway.

We walked in. I was in the lead. I had a beam on the floor—and I should have seen it—but I didn't. I let out a wild shriek, "Doc—!"

And then I fell endlessly.

I mean that exactly. I fell endlessly. Free-fall in space is the same thing of course. But this was different in a subtle way. Around me were walls and these rushed by as my speed built up.

With a spaceman's instinctive gesture, I had reached for my rocket-harness studs. My gloved hands pressed the bulky buttons—and nothing happened.

All of a sudden a terrific calm overcame me—as nothing happened immediately except that dreadful fall continued. I waited to smash against bottom as calmly as if I were waiting for a light for my cigarette.

Finally sense returned to me and I started to fumble frantically with my harness hoping to find the failure in my

(Cont'd On Page 157)



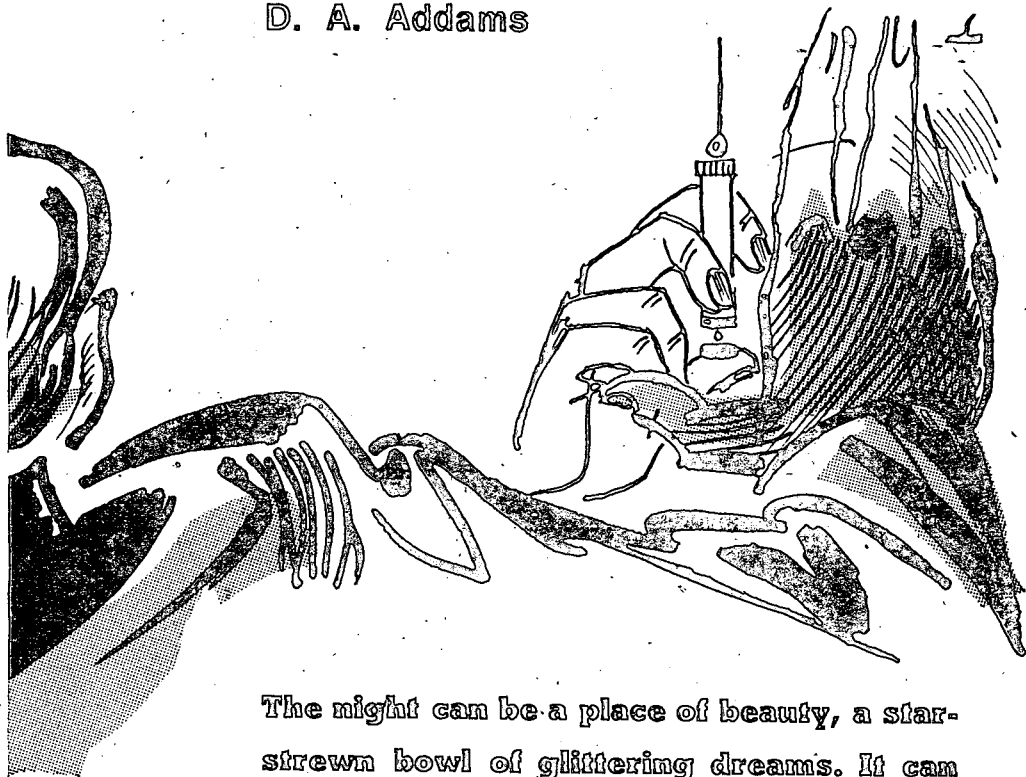
The Sho-Shing advanced. The needle was ready



# FOREST OF THE NIGHT

By

D. A. Addams



The night can be a place of beauty, a star-strewn bowl of glittering dreams. It can also be a black hell where horror is the order of things and monsters rule the void

REG NUGENT leaned on the bar in the Space Club. Outside, the Martian wind lashed against the sides of the Club, punctuating the conversational tone with its eerie chant.

He sipped at his drink, his forty credits of purplish liquid, the concoction of an ingenious barkeep, and eyed the redheaded company man who

was bouncing a girl in a bright green tunic on his knees. His lip curled in distaste at the sight. This was what man had conquered space for, he thought. To provide a haven for commercial entrepreneurs, men who would haul back the Martian dust and sell it to eager Terrans as souvenirs. Valueless, actually, and yet the people of Earth would pay handsomely for a few



grains of Martian sand packed into a plastiglass capsule. He snorted and turned his back to the company man and his companion.

A girl was standing there, looking at him, studying him. Tawny she was, and tall, and when she stretched, there was a tiger yawning. Her eyes were the deepest green, and her mouth was full and ripe. She was packed tightly into the short black tunic she wore. The tunic rose and fell with her breathing, a black, billowy cloud blossoming below her neck. The tunic tapered obliquely to her waist where it was tied with a yellow sash.

Another of the bar girls, Greg thought. Just like the one the company man was bouncing on his knee.

He was about to turn away when she asked, "Nice trip?"

He eyed her again, noticing the long, curved legs that jutted out from the skirts of the tunic. His gaze shifted to her eyes and he found none of the hardness there that he'd expected to find in the eyes of a girl who haunted bars throughout the universe. They were green, a clear, almost luminous green that startled him.

"Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all."

"The trip, you mean?"

"The trip," he smiled, "of course."

She smiled back, and the teeth looked sharp and cold in the dim light of the Club. A momentary shudder flitted up Greg's back.

"My name is Laura," she said.

"A very pretty name, Laura," he smiled again.

"Thank you."

"Something to drink?" he asked.

"Earth whiskey," she said.

"Scotch? Rye? Bour..."

"Scotch."

SHE SMILED at him again, and the teeth seemed sharper this time. She rested her hand on his arm, and he could feel the nails pressing through his blouse, gripping his skin like five pointed needles.

"When are you going back?" she asked.

"Day after tomorrow. Why?"

"Just asking," she said. A fire had leaped into her eyes.

Greg turned to the barkeep. "Another double, Mac, and a scotch, please."

The barkeep nodded, filled the glasses, and set them before Greg.

"A hundred and thirty," he said.

"What!"

"Scotch," the barkeep said tonelessly.

Greg paid, while the girl downed her drink quickly.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

"So soon?" he asked.

"I know a place," she answered rapidly.

"Well, I..."

Her fingers tightened on his arm, and he felt the nails again.

"All right," he said, "All right."

Outside, the air was crisp, and red dust swirls leaped skyward. Her tunic lashed about her legs, the wind billowing her short skirts, then releasing them to drift downward again. They had walked no more than fifty feet from the Club, away from the rectangle of light it cast, when she stopped suddenly, turned into his arms, pressed against him. Her lips sought his in the darkness, and she clung to him tightly, squeezing the breath out of him.

He drew back sharply, his hand flying to his lips. He pulled it away and stared at his fingers. Blood.

"Take me with you," she said. Her voice was low and menacing. "Take me with you when you go back. Some-

thing terrible is happening. Take me with...."

"Just a second," he said. He held her at arm's length, watching her skirts rise and fall with successive gusts of wind. Her legs were lovely, long, tanned, curved. He noticed for the first time that she was barefoot.

"I can't take you back," he said. "I'd need clearance. You know I can't take you back without clearance."

"I'll hide," she hissed, her eyes bright.

"The ship is checked before blast-off. They'd find you."

She pushed into his arms, held herself against him, warm and throbbing.

"I must go with you. Something..."

She was snatched away from him swiftly, the sudden absence leaving a cold, empty space in his arms. The space filled with Martian wind and red dust, and a voice spoke softly beside Greg.

"You must excuse Laura, sir," it said. "She is sometimes a bit impulsive."

Greg looked at the short, squat man with the steel grey hair. His arm was locked in Laura's, and he held her wrist tightly.

"I DIDN'T mind her impulsiveness at all," Greg answered. He didn't like the little man with the grey hair and the strong hands. He didn't like him one bit.

"Ah yes," the little man said, "but I do mind. My name is Maxim. Maxim Cole."

"Greg Nugent," Greg said.

"Yes, how do you do?"

Greg nodded.

"Perhaps you wonder why I interfere? Surely no man wishes such a tender scene to terminate. Least of all, a *Spaceman*." He said the word as if he were saying "rattlesnake."

"Then why don't you run along and peddle your papers?" Greg asked.

The girl was silent, her eyes flashing in the darkness, the yellow sash on her waist showing in the pale light. Like a tiger, Greg thought. Yellow and black like a tiger.

"You are offended," Maxim smiled, "because I interrupted your embrace. A pity, Mr. Nugent, a pity. You see, Laura happens to be my wife."

"He's trying to..." Laura protested.

Maxim's hand fell heavily across her face.

"And," he continued, "no man enjoys the sight of his wife in another man's arms. I suggest you join your space comrades, Mr. Nugent."

Greg stood quiet in the red sand, his big fists clenched into solid balls. A strange noise came from the girl's throat, like a rattle from deep inside. He could see the anger mounting in her cheeks, coloring her face under its deep tan. The eyes narrowed into slender gashes of yellow, gleaming in the wan light. The sharp, pointed teeth were bared. Again the rattle in her throat sounded on the Martian night.

"Come, Laura," Maxim said. "Come." His voice was soft and deadly.

Silently, they padded across the drifting sand, into the night. Greg stood watching them until they disappeared into the darkness. He tasted the blood on his lips again, shrugged his shoulders, and walked back to the Club.

He should have forgotten her by now, he kept telling himself. It had been a month since that night in the sand. And still, the thought of Laura, her green eyes and full form kept flooding back into his memory.

Once, back on Earth, he thought he saw her weaving through a crowd, her

yellow and black tunic flashing in the sun, her long, tanned legs taking wide strides in the city street. He had run after the girl, catching up finally, only to realize she wasn't Laura. He had shrugged and tried to put her out of his mind again.

But the squat, bullfrog figure of Maxim with his grey hair had leaped into his thoughts again. He wondered why Laura would marry such a man. And he cautioned himself against the fact that she was a married woman. But still, he couldn't forget her.

**H**E INQUIRED at the Club about Maxim. The barkeep knew him vaguely: his full title was Dr. Maxim Cole, and he lived in a throw-together far from the field, out on the rough sand dunes. What he did, the barkeep didn't know. Yes, he knew the doctor's wife. Quite a girl, and his eyebrows raised here, quite a girl. Greg gave the man thirty credits and began walking away from the Club and the field, out toward the dunes that rose in the distance.

He passed the deep ditches in the planet's surface, landfalls deep and dangerous, where the ground had suddenly split in civil war with itself. He walked on in the afternoon sun, feeling the wind press against his clothes, feeling the harsh, red sand seep into every wrinkle.

He saw the throw-together perched high on one of the distant dunes, the dust leaping and dancing around it. Quickly, he strode across the sand. He stopped at the front door, pounded at it with his fist.

The sand lashed against the side of the hut, and Greg waited. He pounded again, and from within he heard the sound of footsteps approaching the door. He stepped back. The door

opened, and he was looking down at Dr. Maxim Cole.

The doctor's eyes were unfriendly. "Yes?" he asked.

"Just a little visit," Greg smiled. "I thought you might like to hear the latest news from Earth, video reception being what it is here."

"You thought wrongly, Mr. Nugent," Maxim said.

"Perhaps Laura would be interested," Greg persisted.

Maxim stood blocking the doorway. "Perhaps, but I doubt it strongly."

"Why not ask her? Women usually like to hear the latest gossip."

"I would be happy to ask her, Mr. Nugent. But it so happens that Laura is no longer here."

Greg eyed the other man suspiciously. "She left you?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you," Greg said.

"Then don't," Maxim answered. He started to close the door, but Greg jammed his boot into it.

"Just a minute, friend," he said. "I'd like to come in, if you don't mind."

"I do mind," Maxim answered. "But I should hate to bring on the wrath of a Spaceman. I understand that Earth holds them quite close to her sentimental heart. Come in."

Greg walked into the throw-together. It was modestly furnished, a few chairs, the foamex couch. In the far corner, a straw pallet rested against the wall. A chain with a heavy plasteel collar was solidly bolted into the wall above it.

"Who sleeps there?" Greg asked.

"I keep animals," Maxim explained.

"Is the living room?"

"Sometimes."

"And the chain?"

"I prefer to call it a leash," Maxim paused. "Have you satisfied your curiosity, Mr. Nugent? Are you convinced

that Laura is no longer here?"

"No," Greg said. "Where does that door lead?" He pointed to a large, bolted, plasteel door in the living room wall.

"To my laboratory."

"I didn't know you were experimenting," Greg confessed.

"I didn't know it was any of your business," Maxim retorted.

"What sort of experiments are you conducting?" Greg asked. His eyes swept the room, searching for some evidence that Laura was still there. In the corner, near the straw pallet, he saw a black braided sash.

"Small experiments," the doctor said. "Nothing that would appeal to a conqueror of space."

"How do you know? I might be interested."

"I doubt it strongly. Now, if you don't mind..." He took Greg's elbow and turned him toward the outside door.

"What have you got against Spacemen?" Greg abruptly asked.

"Why, nothing, Mr. Nugent," Maxim said innocently.

Greg eyed the man carefully. "Cole, eh?" he said, as if trying to remember something. "Dr. Maxim Cole."

"Yes."

"Cole," Greg repeated.

"Perhaps I can help you, Mr. Nugent. I hate to see the brow of a Spaceman wrinkled in consternation. The Institute for Biological and Psychological Research. Does that help?"

"Of course," Greg said. "Of course. You work with animals." His face suddenly clouded. "And then..."

"And then your technologists came along with a new idea. Space. The conquest of space."

"You didn't have to object," Greg said, remembering vaguely now, re-

membering the blowup, the investigation, the eventual exile of Cole. "There was room for both sciences."

"YES, THERE was room. But there wasn't money. Do you know how much it costs to dress you in your pretty uniform and send you across the skies?"

"I've an idea," Greg said. There was something he was trying to remember, something important.

"It cost millions, more than the government was willing to spend on my experiment. One had to go. Mr. Nugent. And so I went."

"To Mars?"

"First to Venus, Mr. Nugent. First to Venus. An interesting planet, Venus. Have you had the pleasure?"

"I was on the hop once, thanks."

"A charming place. Not much to offer a Spaceman, perhaps, but a scientist may learn much there. In the steaming jungle, in the dense forest, there is much to learn."

"There was something about your experiments..."

"Yes. And now, I believe you were leaving."

"Something about..."

A terrible roar knifed through the small room, and Greg started perceptibly. It had come from behind the bolted door, the door Maxim said led to his laboratory.

"I remember now," Greg said softly. "I remember the real reason your experiments were stopped. I know why you were exiled from Earth."

"Do you really?"

"Transubstantiation," Greg said. "You were playing with transubstantiation."

"Indeed. And now, goodbye."

The roar rumbled through the house again, and Greg shivered.

"What's behind that door?" he asked.

"Animals," Maxim replied. "You just heard one."

"What kind of animals?"

"Monkeys, guinea pigs, a few Venusian karlkas. See here, I don't see why I have to..."

"That was no monkey," Greg said.

"It wasn't," Maxim agreed. "It was a tiger."

"A tiger?"

"Yes."

"I want to see it."

"I'm sorry."

Greg turned on his heel. "I'll be back," he promised over his shoulder. "As soon as I find Laura, I'll be back."

"You won't find her," Maxim assured him. "She's gone back to Earth."

"Then I'll find her there," Greg answered.

He walked out into the Martian wind, bending his head low against the red dust.

Greg asked a few questions at the clearance tower.

"Do you recall bringing any animals through for Dr. Cole?"

"The buzzard living out in the desert?" the clearance officer had asked.

"Yes, he's the one."

"Had some with him when he first came here, I think," the officer said. "Some of them karlkas. He did come here from Venus, didn't he?"

**"YES, YES."**

"Yeah, he had karlkas with him. And later on... just a second, I'll check."

The officer pressed a series of buttons, playing them like an accordion, and a circular file whirled.

"Everyone on the planet," he explained as the file whirled to a stop. "Cole, here it is. Had a girl with him

when he arrived. Laura. Said she was his wife." The officer looked up at Greg.

"And the animals?"

"Yes, well let me see. Um-huh, here are the karlkas listed. Two crates with a dozen in each."

"And later?"

"Thirty monkeys, and fifty-three guinea pigs. Fifty-six were shipped from Venus, but three died en..."

"And the tiger?"

"What's that?"

"Is a tiger listed?"

"A tiger," the officer chuckled. "No, no tigers on Mars." He looked at Greg suspiciously.

"But did Cole clear one through?"

"Why, no. There's none listed. A tiger, you said?"

"Never mind," Greg snapped. He turned the broad back of his tunic to the puzzled officer, muttering a hasty "thanks." Then he headed for the Club.

The barkeep had come to know him by now.

When he saw Greg, he said, "No, flyboy, I ain't seen her."

Greg grunted, and ordered a drink.

"Any luck with the videosheets back on Earth?"

Greg shook his head at the barkeep, lifted his drink and drained the glass.

A loud young Spaceman, fresh off the Venus hop, his face still dented with the telltale Kreega pock marks, was talking loudly with a friend. She clung to his arm, wide-eyed.

"Planet?" the kid was saying. "If that's a planet, Mars is a comet. Christ, it's a rotten, smelling sinkhole. And the kreega. Goddamned things sink into your skin, burrow there."

"Really?" the girl asked. She giggled and said, "It must be a funny kind of animal."

(Cont'd on Page 158)



(Cont'd From Page 149)

system before I hit bottom. Then a sickly feeling came over me as my light played over my harness—it wasn't the sickness associated with first free-fall either. The harness wires were torn loose where I had grazed the edge of the pit when I fell.

I was almost in a hypnotic state, a trance that transcended rationality and thought—and yet was part of it.

I fell. And I didn't smash against the unyielding bottom as I expected. I just fell.

The rest requires no telling. I fell through, rose a mere hundred meters above the other side of the planetary surface, stopped, reversed my sense of fall and fell through to the other side.

They were waiting. They had rimmed the hundred meter pit and Doc Yeager himself picked me up with his harness.

The tension put me in sick-bay for two weeks. And I still a nervous wreck in a way. Whenever we go into free-fall, I quiver at the nerve-endings.

Look up Doc Yeager's essay, with photographs and story—and speculations—in the *Interplanetary Quarterly*. He's got the horror of my feelings down perfectly. How long ago the pit was built, he doesn't say, but what an engineering race that must have been even if the sole trace of their Mercurian civilization is a single hole right through a planet!

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(continued from page 156)

"It's not an animal," the kid complained. "That's the hell of it. It's a seed. It seeks moisture, and takes it wherever it can find it. Sinks into your goddamned pores and grows there. I had a hell of a time clearing 'em out."

Greg glanced at the girl. She was smoothly rounded, her small, tight figure squeezed into her silk tunic. He felt a sudden wave of sickness as he thought of Laura again.

"Not an animal," the girl said, "my, my!"

"Not that there ain't plenty animals, too, honey. Christ, you never seen such animals like on Venus. In the forest, I mean."

"Monsters?" the girl shrieked.

Greg smiled to himself. *Monsters!*

"Worse," the Spaceman continued, and Greg smiled again. "I seen one animal in the forest, brother! Weirdest thing you ever saw. Changed his shape, believe it or not." He gulped down some whiskey. "Changed his shape."

**G**REG YAWNED.

"Karlkas, they call 'em. I saw one only once. He was drinking from a spring there in the forest, in the night. I flashed a throwspot on him, and he changed, so help me."

"Changed?"

*Karlka, Greg thought. Monkeys, guinea pigs, a few Venusian karlkas.*

"Yeah, changed," the kid continued. "I don't know exactly how it works, of course. But they got a big sac hanging from their necks here, you see." He stroked the girl's neck, and she moved closer to him.

"It's part suggestion and part biological makeup. When their minds suggest a different shape, something gets shot into their blood streams from

that sac under the neck, you see. When I flashed that light on 'im, he changed into a putang—you know, one of them bright white birds. Could barely see 'im there in the light of the throwspot. Then he ran off into the forest, and changed back again, I suppose. Weird, all right, but that's Venus for you."

*Not much to offer a Spaceman, perhaps, but a scientist may learn much there. In the steaming jungles, in the dense forest, there is much to learn.*

*Transubstantiation* leaped into Greg's mind. *Transubstantiation!*

He jumped off the stool and slapped the Spaceman on the back.

"Hey!" the kid protested.

But Greg was already out of the Club, racing across the silent sand dunes, the wind in his face.

"Open up!" he bellowed, his fist battering on the door of the throw-together. "Open up, Cole."

Greg heard footsteps again, waited for the door to open.

Dr. Cole stood before him, his face looking haggard and thin.

"You again!" he said. "Must you keep pestering me? Why don't you fly across space to a new system? Really, Mr. Nugent, this is getting..."

"I'm not here to joke."

"Nor I. Find yourself a star in space somewhere. Get your technicians to build a ship that can..."

"I've found Laura," Greg said.

Maxim's features froze. "What?"

Greg was in the room, the stun-gun at his waist already unholstered and in his hand.

"Open that door," he commanded, pointing to the laboratory.

"I will not."

Greg twisted the potency lever of the gun to full. Maxim watched him.

"Open it," Greg ordered.

"All right," Maxim said calmly. "As

you wish."

He crossed the room and twisted the heavy tumblers in the lock. There was an electronic hum and the door snapped open. Maxim stood aside and allowed Greg to pass. Greg kept the gun trained on him as he looked around.

**T**HERE WERE several cages of monkeys, a few guinea pigs, and scores of small, black karlkas, their pendulous sacs hanging beneath their necks. They stared out at Greg with inquisitive lavender eyes. On several tables, stretched out for dissection, lay a few dead karlkas, their sac split open.

In a corner of the room pacing a cage nervously, was a beautiful specimen of a Bengal tiger.

Tawny it was, and long, and when it stretched the green eyes became gashes against an oval face. The yellow and black stripes rippled smoothly over the graceful body. Sullenly, it growled, exposing the teeth, even and white.

Greg's eyes widened, and his breath came in hurried gasps.

"It is, isn't it?" he asked Maxim.

"Yes," Maxim said. "Very much so. A tiger."

"That's not what I meant. You know what I..."

"Laura? Yes, Mr. Nugent. I call her Laura."

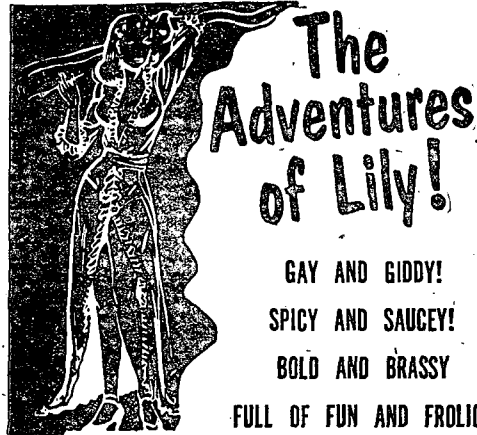
The tiger growled, saliva dripping from its fangs.

"God," Greg said. "Good God."

"A simple process," Maxim explained. "The karlka is an amazing animal, as you may have surmised."

"You must be insane," Greg murmured. "To do a thing like this, a man must be..."

"Ah, no," Maxim replied. "No, my young friend. To control life is not



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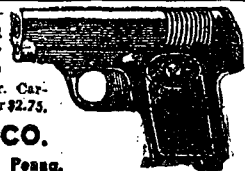
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insanity. Shooting off into space would better qualify in that category. This is different, quite different."

"Why?" Greg demanded. "Why did you have to use Laura?"

"Why, she was available. The monkeys and guinea pigs, ah, but you can see for yourself. It wouldn't work. There are very few left, unfortunately. I've done a lot for Laura, Mr. Nugent. She was nothing more than a lost Earthgirl in a bar on the edge of the Venusian jungle. Then I met her. Now look at her." He smiled.

Greg watched the big cat stalk the floor of the cage, its nails rasping against the plasteel.

"All matter constantly changes, Mr. Nugent. But such a slow process! How could the process be made faster? How could matter be changed almost instantaneously? That was my problem."

"And you found your solution."

"Partly, on Venus. There in the sac of an animal no larger than a squirrel. A strange compound, too. But then, you are familiar with the indefinable elements that Venusian life thrives on, are you not?"

"And what good will it do? What have you accomplished?"

"Nothing, yet. Nothing until Laura can change without the use of the fluid in the karlka's sac. It's all suggestion, you know. Suggestion, and a shot of that fluid into their blood streams, such as they are. Much like our adrenalin, don't you know. It was easy with Laura. A simple subject. Constant suggestion did it, even down to the clothes she wore. And injections of the fluid, of course. A tiger."

He glanced at the animal, smiling again.

"But then, all women are really tigers, aren't they, Mr. Nugent?"

"YOU FILTHY scum," Greg shouted. "Bring her back. Change her or I'll..."

"You'll what?" Maxim asked calmly.

"I'll... I'll..."

The tiger snarled in sudden rage.

"Exactly," Maxim snapped. "You'll do nothing. You don't know how to bring her back."

"Get against that wall," Greg ordered, the gun leveled at Maxim's head. His eyes swept the laboratory, lighting on vials, hypodermics, test tubes. "The fluid and suggestion, you said. Is this the fluid?"

He snatched a hypodermic from the table and slowly approached Maxim with it. "You're a snake, Dr. Cole," he said, "a filthy, rotten snake. I'm going to shoot you full of this stuff, and you'll be a snake, crawling around on your belly, wriggling on the floor."

"You fool," Maxim shouted. "Put that hypo down. It contains strychnine."

"Which hypo is the right one?" Greg demanded. "Tell me or I'll stick you with this one. It doesn't make any difference to me. Which one, damn you!"

"Behind you on the table," Maxim said. "It's marked with a red line."

Greg turned, and in that instant Maxim's hand shot to the bolt on the cage. The tiger paced nervously behind the bars, sensing the tenseness in the air, growling in its throat. Maxim threw open the cage door and screamed, "Out, Laura, out!" With a terrible leap, the tiger bounded from the cage to land in the center of the laboratory. The jowls curled back exposing sharp, white fangs. A low growl filled the room.

Fear edged its way up Greg's spine, clutching him with cold-tipped fingers. And then, before he could shout

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a warning, the beast had whirled and sprung through the air from a crouch, its talons ripping at Maxim's throat, its fangs sinking deep into his neck.

"Cole; for God's sake!" Greg shouted. He turned and snatched the hypo with the red line on it from the table.

"No," Cole screamed, "no, Laura. Noooooooo." His voice trailed away.

Greg sprinted across the room, stabbed the hypodermic into the sinewy muscles at the back of the tiger's neck.

He dropped the hypo and seized the animal in a strange embrace, sweat bursting forth on his forehead, his hands trembling. He heard the deep growl within the beast, smelled the pungent jungle smell, saw the fresh blood dripping from claw and fang. He gripped the struggling shoulders, held them tightly, all the while whispering, "Laura, Laura darling, Laura."

He pressed his lips deep into the yellow fur at the base of the neck, breathing deeply, tightening his grip.

And then, after an eternity, the muscles relaxed, the fur smoothed over, the snarling bundle of claw and fang relaxed into a tender sobbing smoothness.

Greg collapsed beside Laura on the floor, his body wracked with the agony of sudden relief. An easy subject, Maxim had said. An easy subject.

They spent a glorious two weeks on Earth, Greg applying for his semi-annual leave as soon as they arrived. Once they passed a store window loaded with furs.

It was some consolation to Greg that his wife was not like other women. In fact, she seemed to exhibit an extreme distaste toward furs of any kind.

THE END

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